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Day one training for homeless count, on to Jan. 24 survey

By CRAIG GARRETT Staff Writer

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Venice-based On The Spot staffers assist area homeless with medical needs. They are involved in the Jan. 24 survey. PHOTO PROVIDED

NORTH PORT — They learned to fill out forms. Now it's on to the job of counting North Port's homeless population.



It was an intro Friday for those volunteering for the Point-In-Time count, a federal program to assess the nation's homeless.

Florida's count determines federal funding, which helps get people off the streets and back on track, whether it's counseling, treatment, on disability, in housing or working, according to those running the program.

The 24-hour survey for Sarasota and Manatee counties is run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which passes that obligation to nonprofits or divisions of local government. In Sarasota and Manatee, that's the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness.

The count is Jan. 24-25, volunteers in teams fan out, recording their encounters and giving the respondents a goodie bag of socks, a toothbrush, a mask, shampoo and a comb.

Volunteers Friday at a North Port Social Services division conference room went over a homeless survey list, a three-page booklet to count the area's homeless.

Volunteers in pairs ask the same basics in any survey, name, age and gender. But questions about the pandemic affecting their lives, disabilities and how long they'd been homeless are also asked.



Made clear, however, was exactly who qualifies as homeless, as those couch hopping or in a motel room for the week disqualify themselves.

Florida has about 28,000 homeless on any given day. But the homeless are often skittish, will vanish when word spreads someone is coming around with a clipboard and questions, police report, which makes exact counts difficult.

“They kind of disappear,” said Sgt. Scott Miranda, North Port’s police liaison to the city’s Community and Youth Services division, commander of the Homeless Outreach Team, or HOT.

The second question on the survey is critical in deciding funding eligibility: Where did you sleep on the night of Jan. 24? If the respondent answered in the woods, outside or in a car, that’s officially homeless, said Amiee Barth, who led Friday’s training and who works with the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness.

“Remember,” she reminded the volunteers of outdoor encampments, “you’re walking into their living room. It just doesn’t have walls.”

The volunteers pair up beginning Jan. 24. They work at pre-assigned places such as meal sites or bus depots, tasked in recording who’s found.

Woodsy or sketchy places are left to the police.

The Sarasota/Manatee Point-In-Time survey last year was limited due to the pandemic, but its survey-takers reportedly counted exactly five people in North Port in 2020, which likely was off. A local church on any given night will feed 10 to 20 homeless, for instance. The survey ends exactly 24 hours later.

Bonnie Saxman enlisted herself and others with On The Spot, a nonprofit whose staff administers medical aid to the area’s homeless. Her group, she said, will see

50 to 60 men and women just in Englewood, treating them for day-labor injuries, cuts or gashes from simply living outside. The group in their orange Subaru had gained the confidence of some homeless, she said, which could help in the Point-In-Time tally.

“Get some true numbers this time,” Saxman said.

Those with questions on the homeless survey can call 941-955-8987 or email spteh@suncoastpartnership.org.

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