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FEATURED

Dozens of homeless counted in Englewood

By ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH STAFF WRITER

Jan 29, 2022



Cynthia Voortman, co-founder of On the Spot Aid Inc., gives bike lights during the Point in Time Count while at 100 Church in North Port. On the Spot Aid Inc. volunteers also counted the homeless in Englewood.

SUN PHOTO BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH

ENGLEWOOD — About 40 homeless people in Englewood were identified in the point-in-time count this week.

The national study is designed to count people experiencing homelessness one single night throughout the U.S. The count helps plan services for local needs, measure progress in decreasing homelessness along with identify strengths and gaps in a community's current homelessness assistance system.

However, some volunteer counters in Englewood say those services aren't available after speaking to the homeless.

This year, COVID-19 questions were added to the study including if the person had COVID-19 or lost housing, income and couldn't pay the rent or mortgage because of COVID-19 issues.

Other questions included how many separate times in the past three years has a person been homeless or are a victim of domestic violence or fleeing from being stalked or dating violence.

Another section asks if the homeless person is battling drug or alcohol addiction, physical or developmental disability, a chronic health condition, mental health issues or HIV/AIDS.

The last question asks the person to check all that apply to their current homeless situation including the need for food, housing placement, daycare, legal aide, health care, education, substance abuse services, case management, employment or mental health services.

That's where volunteers with the nonprofit On the Spot learned there's very little help for Englewood and North Port's homeless.

"One woman said every time she got settled in a safe area she gets kicked out by deputies several times in one night," said Bonnie Saxman, co-founder of On the Spot Aid Inc.



Saxman said once they start communicating with them, they learn about their plights.

“One of them is that they don’t like to leave their campsite to go to a shelter when it gets cold because they are afraid someone is going to steal everything they own that they leave in the woods,” she said. “They aren’t allowed to bring their tents or belongings to the shelters to stay overnight. It’s another reason why they don’t seek shelter during hurricane season.”

‘SPIDERS, RED ANTS, MOSQUITOES’

On the Spot Aid Inc. sees the impact of homelessness on South County residents.

Saxman and co-founder Cynthia Voortman and their volunteers go to camps, parks and the woods where the homeless live or gather and need medical treatment.

According to Voortman, spiders, red ants and mosquitoes cause huge issues for homeless people because they can’t keep the wounds covered or dry. When wounds become infected, the person gets sick and may need to be hospitalized which can become a drain on the medical system, she said.

“Not only are medical problems a vicious cycle with the homeless, but so are tickets and incarceration,” she said. “If a homeless person doesn’t have a light on their bike, they can get a fine. If they can’t get a ride to court or can’t pay, they may end up in jail. If that happens, they now have a record which they must check off when they are applying for a job or housing.”

She said they handed out two bike lights for homeless people.

“By them having lights, they aren’t getting hit by vehicles,” Voortman said. “Prior to

giving out the lights, we had several of our homeless become victims of hit and runs.”

On the Spot Aid Inc. volunteer Pat Vertefeuille said during the count, the homeless confided in her about the lack of affordable housing, no rides to medical and dental services, limited mental health and addiction services in Englewood and North Port.

“All of the people I spoke to were eager to explain their situation, but there’s very little help in this part of the county,” she said. “They don’t want to live in Sarasota because they work on the Charlotte side of Englewood. There’s no transportation from Sarasota to Charlotte. There’s not even public transportation from Englewood to North Port for the homeless to use the county health department.”

‘NEW TO HOMELESS’

Voortman said they’ve met older people who are “new to homelessness.”

“It’s difficult to watch a 64-year-old man who is newly homeless,” she said. “He didn’t realize his belongings would get soaked if he didn’t put a tarp over his tent when it pours. He sprained his ankle and didn’t have any bandages, ice packs or supplies, like he did when he had a house.”

On the Spot volunteers believe they successfully counted 34 homeless in Englewood and three in North Port because they established a relationship with that community.

“We met them in a location that is familiar and safe like Indian Mound Park and Englewood Bible Church weekly community dinners,” Saxman said.

There were six others counted at Jubilee Center in Englewood, Saxman said.



“We are very happy with the amount of surveys completed, even though we know it’s not the total number of unhoused in the area,” she said. “It’s a pretty big wake-up call for people who think there’s only a handful of homeless living in Englewood and North Port.”

Email: elaine.allen@yoursun.com

