

# Homeless/Many avoid winter shelters

► FROM PAGE 1A

all over the city. Though most spaces were uninhabited, he continued talking to each new location as if a real person was there, whether he knew it or not.

On his last stop for the night, Greene called out to the darkness under a bridge once more. This time, a voice responded.

Burrowed 2 feet into a pile of rough large rocks, Jeffrey Hymes, 27, slept on a rug with multiple layers of blankets and sleeping bags to survive.

"I'm actually warm," he insisted. "But I didn't know it was going to snow."

For the last three months, the area under this particular bridge is the place he's called home. This winter is his third bout of homelessness in the last three years.

After coming to Cedar Rapids to help a friend, the native of Sparta, Tenn., had a falling out with his roommate and was left with no other acquaintances to affordably bunk with. Soon after, he lost his ID and other identifying documents.

He has worked on and off doing concrete construction work. But with no documents, no phone and no contact with his parents, housing and work is difficult to secure.

And despite bone-chilling temperatures, the winter overflow shelter operated by Willis Dady Homeless Services was not an option for a few reasons.

"It gets old carrying everything," he said, for one. With a shopping cart full of valuables, moving possessions day in and day out from the overnight shelter isn't practical.

But the prospect of sleeping in a crowded room full of strangers is a bridge too far for the man trying to stay away from drugs and alcohol. With low-barrier shelters open to any homeless person to keep them out of deadly temperatures, his personal stumbling blocks are found too easily in close quarters with others who share the same struggles, he said.

"This is what I'd call a safe spot for me," he said under the bridge. "I go out of my way not to ask for things."

There, he's lulled to sleep each night by what he calls a white noise machine — the overhead traffic.

## THE RESULTS

That night, volunteers found 30 others like him — a new Linn County record for the annual winter "Point in Time" count that's conducted across the country. Last winter, the unsheltered count for Linn County was 19 people.

The winter record follows a new summer record in July 2022, when the number of unsheltered people living on the streets eclipsed triple digits to 107 — more than triple the number three years prior.

The record number comes despite the fact that the overflow winter shelter could have accommodated all of them. That night, 66 of the shelter's 100 beds were occupied.

"It speaks to the fact that shelter is not the solution and we need to focus on quality housing in this community that meets the needs of high-barrier individuals," said J'nae Peterman, director of housing services for the Waypoint nonprofit. "Those experiencing homelessness for long periods of time need



Jeffrey Hymes of Tennessee smokes a cigarette as he slowly wakes up Jan. 26 from sleeping under a bridge in Cedar Rapids. Hymes said he originally came to Iowa to help a friend, but eventually found himself without a place to live. He has been homeless off and on for nearly three years and has been living under a bridge for three months. He dug out a pit to layer a piece of carpet and multiple blankets to try to stay warm, but Hymes says waking up in the morning is the hardest part. He hopes to return home, but without an ID or other identifying documents he says it is nearly impossible to find a job. (Savannah Blake photos/The Gazette)



A flashlight shines on abandoned possessions underneath a bridge Jan. 26 in southeast Cedar Rapids.

higher intervention than what is currently available."

## AN INCREASE IN VEHICLES

A concerning new trend has accompanied the record unsheltered winter count this year: the number of people sleeping in their vehicles. This January, those in cars represented a majority of the 30 unsheltered people counted.

Over the last few years, Peterman estimates Waypoint has seen a 50 percent increase in people counted in cars. The trend has impacted the routes volunteers take in recent years, which now feature multiple parking lots and encourage the counters to make a point of checking vehicles they come across.

In parking lots throughout the city, they look for signs of people inside: foggy windows, exhaust coming from the tailpipe, blankets or possessions piled inside and people who may be sleeping out of view. For suspected vehicles who don't answer a knock on the window, notations are made on the vehicle type and license plate for later outreach.

The trend may be indicative of those who may be new to homelessness, those with pets who cannot go to a shelter and those with unique medical needs. Those struggling chronically with housing insecurity often lose their vehicles, with time.

## HOW THE CENSUS WORKS

Each January, on a night designated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, designated lead agencies organize Point in Time counts for their area. Here, Waypoint



Waypoint Director of Housing Services J'nae Peterman hands HACAP employee Jordan Dumolien a bag of supplies Jan. 25 to pass out to homeless people who volunteers find along their routes.



Outreach worker John Greene knocks on a car window Jan. 26 to see if anyone is residing in it during the winter homeless count. The Waypoint services nonprofit says there has been an uptick in the number of people living in their cars.

organizes volunteers to conduct a census of all homeless people in Linn, Benton and Jones counties — sheltered and unsheltered.

The biannual counts, conducted by Willis Dady, HACAP, Waypoint and community volunteers, helps calculate the size of the homeless population, including the number of people sleeping in places not meant for habitation.

Information from street outreach personnel, calls for services, the Cedar Rapids Police Department and other county sheriff's departments is used to draw a map with multiple routes and stops for various volunteer teams.

This winter, routes divided by quadrant took about three hours to complete with 17 volunteers. From about 11:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m., volunteers scour every corner of the routes under bridges, at parks, rest stops, railroad tracks, parking lots and car wash bays.

Counts are done at night to minimize complications from daytime movements and accurately find as many people as possible. In recent years, those living on the streets have become more vigilant in staying out of sight.

"The Cedar Rapids Police Department has gotten more involved with moving people along, so

people are hiding more," said Peterman. "It's getting harder."

At each stop, people are asked simple demographic questions — how long they've been living on the streets or in emergency shelters, the number of times they've been homeless in the last three years and the ZIP code of their last permanent residence. If they choose, they also can identify their disabilities, veteran status and whether they're fleeing domestic violence.

In the summer, extra teams are added to check the entirety of the bike trail from Hiawatha to Tait Cummins Memorial Park, and volunteers are dispatched during the day to camp sites in Benton and Jones counties. Last year's record-hitting July count did not conclude until about 5 a.m.

Though summer counts are not required by HUD for federal funding, advocates and nonprofits say the warm weather census is a more accurate picture of the homeless population.

"On a night that's snowing, your cousin might let you stay for the night, but that's it," said Waypoint's Peterman.

After each count, results written on paper are tallied, combed through for those who may have been counted twice, and entered into a statewide system at the Des Moines-based Institute for Community Alliances, which manages a homeless management information system for 96 of Iowa's 99 counties, as well as for many other states.

After analysis and data cleanup, the numbers are compiled into large tables and submitted directly to HUD. HUD then analyzes the counts from across the country and releases the results to Congress. The count reports are made available to organizations and the public within about two months of each census.

## BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Each interaction on the count takes only a few minutes, but volunteers use the encounters as a chance to do more than tally the numbers. With a population that is difficult to reach in conventional ways during business hours, it's an invaluable opportunity to build rapport and connect individuals to services.

For Greene, an outreach worker for HACAP's Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, it's a chance to make sure they

## HOW OTHERS COUNT

Using similar federal guidelines, other cities conduct their Point in Time counts similarly to Cedar Rapids, with a few variations.

Polk and Story counties, for example, enter survey results from the count in real time to the statewide database via smartphones and tablets for Des Moines and Ames, respectively.

Polk County's count has multiple shifts for volunteers running from 8 a.m. to midnight. This January, it had 35 volunteers.

"It's nice to connect with folks during daylight," said Angie Arthur, executive director of Homeward in Des Moines. "We're walking through people's homes. Where they're living is their home, and we want to be respectful of that."

Waypoint is considering other ways to reach more of the population for the count during the day at places like meal sites and congregating areas. It's also considering a geographic information system (GIS) that also could improve future routes by pulling from data collected throughout the year by outreach workers.

Iowa City's Shelter House, which covers Johnson and Washington counties for each count, continues to do its census on paper after past data errors with electronics. The count takes about the same amount of time each winter as Linn County's.

"There are some places that change every year, but typically it's not a large geographic area in Johnson County," said Mark Serterth, associate executive director of Shelter House. "A lot of times, they're on the edge of town or in the bridges closer to downtown Iowa City."

Shelter House has not seen a substantial increase in unsheltered car counts.

Shelter House does not typically conduct July counts like Linn County, due to a lack of staffing and because there's a year-round low-barrier shelter in Iowa City.

— Elijah Decious

get on the right path to housing. This year was his first helping with the count in Iowa after doing it a few times in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the sheer size of the homeless population has become a mounting crisis.

After a bout with homelessness himself, he has a perspective he said even some volunteers don't understand.

"I don't think some of these volunteers realize that I've never been so scared in my life (when homeless)," Greene said. "All the emotions that go into it."

He understands why some people don't go to the shelter, even though it had room.

"They're so crowded, it's unbearable," he said, for many. "There's some very intelligent people that live outside that just don't want to come inside."

And to the people from whom he hears "I don't deserve help" frequently, he offers blankets, coats, hydration, food or even a smile and listening ear because he knows how far the little things go for those living in desperate and lonely circumstances.

Greene and the volunteers on his route continue to show up for the count because of the difference it makes in their day-to-day work.

"You have to approach each client differently. You don't know exactly what their situation is," Greene has learned. "That's where empathy comes in."

Comments: (319) 398-8340; elijah.decious@thegazette.com