

Lee County addresses homelessness

By JASMINE GALLUP AND NANCY MCCLEARY Jan 30, 2021



Jamie Peters, a transient, left, is administered a COVID-19 test by volunteer Cindy Hall from S3 Housing Connect on Wednesday night in the parking lot of Mrs. Wenger's Restaurant. The testing took place in advance of the county's Point in Time homeless count, which began later in the evening.

Volunteers Mary and David Barbour ventured into the cold Wednesday night on a mission to help the homeless.

The two Deep River residents were first-time volunteers for the Point In Time count, an annual survey that records how many homeless, either in shelters, hotels, or on the street, live in the city. The nationwide count is locally organized by S3 Housing Connect, a city-county task force that aims to reduce homelessness.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires that communities receiving federal funds from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants program conduct a count in the last week of January of all people in homeless shelters, explains the website for the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Unsheltered counts are required every other year, although most communities, like Lee County, conduct an unsheltered count annually.

The Barbours were tasked this week with visiting eight different locations around town where the homeless frequent.

For about an hour, the couple surveyed abandoned houses, woods off major roads and areas behind chain stores without finding anyone. But on their fourth stop, they discovered someone in need.

"Is anyone in there? We have some food and some blankets we'd like to give you," Mary called out as she stood on the dilapidated porch of an abandoned house on Hughes Street.

After a few minutes, a light appeared in the window before the door swung open to reveal a young man with a cell phone. The man, who only gave the initials, E.G., was 28-years-old and had been living on the street for about a month, he said.

"I've been incarcerated and when I got out, I pretty much had nowhere to go," he said. "I don't have no family close to here."

Without nearby support, E.G. said, his options are limited.

"I'm all right. I've been surviving," he said. "I'm looking for a job too. I recently applied and hopefully I get it. From there, I was gonna try and get a hotel and move up from there, you know?"

The meeting was brief, but before leaving, the Barbours told E.G. about some of the services in town that could help him, then they handed over a bag of food, blankets and clothes. It was that gesture that seemed to be the most lasting.

"Thank you so much," E.G. said, as he carried the gifts inside. "God bless you."

The Point in Time count will continue until Monday, according to organizer Cindy Hall. The total number of homeless will reveal whether S3 Housing Connect's efforts to reduce homelessness have been successful.