

Lee County homelessness on the rise

By Jasmine Gallup jgallup@sanfordherald.com Feb 20, 2021

Homelessness in Lee County has increased since last year, according to data from S3 Housing Connect, a city-county task force that aims to reduce homelessness.

Each year, the agency conducts a Point in Time count to record how many sheltered and unsheltered homeless people live in the county. The count is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for Sanford to receive federal funding.

This year, there were 182 homeless people living in Lee County, compared to 157 in 2020, the data shows. That's a 16% increase since last year and a 184% increase since the count started in 2017, when there were only 64 people living with homelessness in Lee County. Since then, the count has oscillated, rising to 95 in 2018 and 373 in 2019 and then heading down again.

The coronavirus may have been one contributing factor to homelessness this year. People provided different reasons for their homelessness in January, according to count coordinator Cindy Hall. Those were: COVID-19, eviction, loss of a job, loss of job hours, health and the death of family members.

People living with homelessness had different races and ages. According to the data, 40% were white, 43% were Black and 17% were Hispanic. There were 12 veterans.

Of the 182 people counted, 34% were ages 36-50, 29% were ages 21-25, 15% were ages 51-64, 13% were over age 65, and 9% were under age 20. The data does not include Lee County Schools' count of homeless children in the district, which is more than 200, according to Hall.

People were split between staying in area homeless shelters and living unsheltered. Eighty-nine were staying in one of five shelters — Outreach Mission Inc.'s men's and women's homeless shelters, HAVEN, the Bread of Life emergency shelter or Family Promise. Ninety-three were living unsheltered, staying in hotels, abandoned houses or outdoors.

According to Hall, people said their biggest needs were first, a place to sleep, then food, employment or obtaining a GED.

Several area nonprofits may soon be able to help with those needs after receiving a \$202,000 grant from the state last week, according to a news release.

After applying for the funds jointly, Outreach Mission Inc., the Salvation Army, Bread of Life Ministry, and the H3 street medicine program will split the money among different programs to help the homeless, the release stated. Each of the nonprofits partners with S3 Housing Connect.

The coordinated effort helps each agency enhance their strengths and ensures services aren't duplicated across agencies, the release stated. Outreach Mission, Inc., will manage the money, according to the release.

"We are excited to be taking the lead with this unique partnership," Executive Director Hamer Carter said in the release. "It is something new that we need to try. We believe that it will pay off for those who need shelter and a place to get back on their feet while they find a permanent home."