

Homeless count takes place next week

By Jasmine Gallup jgallup@sanfordherald.com Jan 23, 2021

Volunteers are once again preparing to count the number of homeless people in Sanford, coordinator Cindy Hall said Friday.

The annual Point in Time count records how many sheltered and unsheltered homeless people live in the city, and is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for Sanford to receive federal funding in order to better provide for their needs. The survey is organized each year by S3 Housing Connect, a city-county task force that aims to reduce homelessness.

This year, things will be a little different because of the coronavirus pandemic, Hall said. She and other volunteers have a full week to complete the count instead of a single day, so Hall has been collecting data while she does other outreach work for the task force.

As her husband, Dr. William Hall, tests people for COVID-19 for the H-3 street medicine program, Cindy Hall asks people about how long they have been homeless and how they lost their home.

So far, she said, what she's seen has not been good.

"(Homelessness) is worse," Hall said Friday. "A lot more people are out of work. Yesterday, when I was going around to the Palomino (Motel), one of the questions I ask them is, 'Why are you staying here?' There are various answers — somebody had a fire, health reasons, sometimes. But most often, it was because of loss of employment, so they couldn't support the place where they were."

Although there has not yet been a recorded case of COVID-19 among the homeless population, according to Hall, the pandemic has affected the community in other ways.

"One of the difficult things is for the kids who are homeless to try and do their schoolwork remotely when they're in a car or a motel room or in a shelter," Hall said.

Data from previous years shows that since 2017, homelessness in Lee County has increased by 145%. In 2017, there were 64 homeless people living in Lee County, compared to 95 in 2018, 373 in 2019 and 157 in 2020.

Some of the increase may be due to the work the city is doing to combat homelessness, Hall said. As word spreads about the programs and services available in Lee County, people from other counties may be migrating to Lee County.

"One thing we will ask is, 'Where did you live before you came here?' And we'll see, then, if this is becoming a problem," Hall said. "There are some counties that have not really begun to help the homeless much at all. I credit our vision with the fact that several years ago, Mayor (Chet) Mann wanted to start the S3 task force and everybody on the task force is working toward the same goal."

The Point in Time count will be completed Wednesday by Hall and other volunteers who spread out across the city to find people living unsheltered, she said. During the event, volunteers will talk to people about where and how they can get help, and distribute bags of food, hygiene items and winter wear.

Hall hopes to fill 150 bags with supplies before Wednesday, she said. Donations of pop-top canned foods, snacks, small blankets, socks, winter hats, scarves, gloves and jackets are needed. Items can be dropped off at the Buggy Building, 115 Chatham St., Sanford, or First Baptist Church, 202 Summitt Drive, Sanford.

For more information, to volunteer or to donate, call Cindy Hall 919-774-4220 or 919-935-9028.