

## NEW GROUP FORMING

# Help for Volusia's homeless moving forward

**Annual count shows decline, but numbers vary widely**

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DAYTONA BEACH -- While the annual count shows the number of homeless people scattered around Volusia County might be gradually dropping, efforts to help the unsheltered are more robust than ever.

"We still have a lot of work to do," Jeff White, head of the Volusia Flagler Coalition for the Homeless, said Monday at the monthly meeting of the Round Table of Volusia County Elected Officials held at Daytona Beach International Airport.



Jeff White with the Volusia/Flagler Coalition for the Homeless tells elected officials Monday that a continued decline in the annual point-in-time homeless count is 'an indicator we're moving in the right direction.' News-Journal/NIGEL COOK

The mayors and other elected leaders heard about plans for a new countywide group to come up with detailed recommendations for Volusia's homeless by the end of this summer. They were also given the latest on West Volusia County leaders huddling at the end of May for a meeting to discuss the best ways to attack homelessness, and the number of people being helped at the temporary Salvation Army Shelter in Daytona Beach.

They were also the first to hear that the annual point in time count done in late January found 1,005 homeless people in Volusia and Flagler counties. The tally has been dropping since at least 2013, when 1,880 homeless people were documented, White said.

The 2014 tally was 1,668 and last year it was 1,325, he said.

"It's an indicator we're moving in the right direction," White said, attributing the downward trend to more of an emphasis on rapid rehousing, federal dollars getting veterans off the streets and increased efforts to prevent homelessness.

The vast majority of homeless are always found in Volusia County. This year, 901 homeless were counted in Volusia and 104 were in Flagler.

All those figures are a galaxy away from the roughly 5,000 homeless many people estimate is a truer count for Volusia.

The discrepancy between the 1,005 and 5,000 can be traced to the definition of homelessness. The point in time count required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development does not include people with no permanent home who are in jail or may be staying on a friend's couch. It focuses on street homeless who are sleeping under the stars, in cars or at emergency shelters.

The point in time count found 112 kids under the age of 18. The Volusia County school system uses a broader definition for homelessness, including people who couch surf, and last year counted 2,322 homeless kids.

While some of those 2,322 homeless students are teenagers on their own, many are younger and if their homeless parents were included they would make the county's tally climb even higher.

Nearly 720 of the 901 Volusia homeless included in the point in time count were over the age of 24; 588 were males; 617 were white; 192 said it was their first time being homeless; and 105 had physical disabilities.

Some 63 percent, 567 homeless, were found in Daytona Beach. Next highest was DeLand, with 167 homeless who made up 18.5 percent of the total. Holly Hill had the third-highest tally with 51 homeless and 6 percent of the total.

More is being learned about local homeless this year with the 396 assessments of the unsheltered the Salvation Army has done so far in 2016. About 140 of them reported battling both mental health issues and substance abuse.

About 190 have been placed in transitional and permanent housing since January, including those who have been given money for bus or plane tickets to travel to other areas where they can get help.

The Salvation Army is helping with a temporary 86-bed shelter on Ballough Road. But local leaders agree permanent solutions are needed.

Halifax Urban Ministries is leading an effort to convert the old Hurst Elementary School north of Daytona Beach into a family shelter slated to open early next year.

In DeLand, the Neighborhood Center of West Volusia is planning to expand from 10 shelter beds to a total of at least 30, maybe 50 if enough help comes through. DeLand Mayor Bob Apgar said that will be one of the items discussed at a workshop of the DeLand City Commission tentatively set for late May that will be open to other elected officials on the west side of Volusia and groups involved in homelessness.

West Volusia needs to figure out its role, but ultimately the problem needs to be tackled comprehensively countywide, Apgar said.

The Volusia Flagler Commission on Homelessness, an all-volunteer group that oversees spending of federal housing dollars that flow into Volusia County, has been expanding its membership and mission. The group is in the process of recruiting about 55 people who will be asked to study homeless data and funding sources, look at the current inventory of resources and make recommendations by late summer on the best ways to help the homeless in Volusia County, said Sam Willett, the new chairman of the group.

The 55 people expected to start meeting in about a month will include local government officials, business leaders, nonprofit heads and homeless people from throughout the county. Their goal will be to come up with a comprehensive list of ideas coming from a unified force, said Willett, a local executive with Bank of America.

An educational public relations campaign that will put a face on homelessness with everything from social media posts to possibly television commercials is also in the works among members of the Commission on Homelessness, said Daytona Beach City Commissioner Pam Woods.

"We want to tell the stories of people who got out of homelessness," Woods said.

