

# WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH OUR HOMELESS?

## REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The Grand Jury undertook this investigation to call attention to the issue of homelessness and its impact on Nevada County and its citizens.

## BACKGROUND

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) identifies homelessness as follows: *temporary* homelessness describes the 80% who stay in the system for brief periods and do not return, *episodic* homelessness describes the 10% who move in and out of the system on a fairly regular basis, and *chronic* homelessness describes the 10% who have been transient for a year or more or have a disabling condition.

## PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

The Grand Jury interviewed representatives from the Nevada County Department of Social Services (DSS), Hospitality House (HH), the Emergency Assistance Coalition (EAC), and local law enforcement agencies. The Grand Jury also examined documents provided by these representatives.

## FINDINGS

### General

1. Major factors contributing to homelessness in Western Nevada County are the lack of affordable housing, low-paying entry-level employment opportunities, and substance abuse.
2. According to statistics gathered by HH and EAC, 90% of the homeless in Western Nevada County are local citizens.
3. In June 2005 a count by HH found 238 homeless individuals in Western Nevada County, of which 46 were children. This street count includes only a portion of the homeless population. Some may be living deep in the woods, in abandoned buildings, or sleeping on private property. According to HH testimony, HUD recommends that such counts be doubled to reflect the number of homeless.

4. DSS determines an individual's eligibility for and administers numerous programs that provide ongoing long-term assistance to Nevada County citizens. These programs include CalWorks, Medi-Cal, and Welfare-to-Work.
5. Many of the homeless are part of the workforce, and some of the children attend local schools.

### **Emergency Assistance Coalition**

1. The Emergency Assistance Coalition has been in operation since November 6, 1989. It provides assistance via a central telephone number (530-272-6659) for those needing emergency food, shelter and/or gasoline. The service is for people experiencing a temporary crisis situation who lack the funds or resources to meet those needs. Trained volunteers assess the need and arrange for appropriate help, and also identify resources for further help as needed.
2. EAC operates under the auspices of the Nevada County Housing Development Corporation, a non-profit developer of self-help housing, transitional living facilities, and emergency shelters.
3. All services are free, using funds provided by the faith-based community, including local churches, private organizations, and individuals.
4. Services are provided 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Phone calls go to Helpline Information and Assistance. These calls are routed to DSS during normal business hours, to EAC volunteers between 3:00 pm and 9:00 pm, and to the Sheriff's Department after 9:00 pm. Referrals to EAC for persons needing service are also made by local law enforcement agencies. Services are limited to temporary emergencies; long-term needs are referred to other agencies.
5. After making contact with an EAC representative, persons needing assistance respond to a comprehensive telephonic questionnaire. These are first used to explore other ways of getting assistance, for example from friends and relatives. They are also used to identify those with exceptional needs, to eliminate habitual callers, and to create a database of user profiles and services rendered.
6. DSS helps coordinate EAC services by hosting a weekly case management meeting.
7. EAC responded to 1,186 calls in 2005. These calls involved 1,402 clients: 469 adult males, 606 adult females, and 327 children. Since its inception 16 years ago, EAC has responded to more than 10,700 calls.
8. Services provided in 2005 were: 359 nights of lodging for 585 persons, 133 meals, and 297 gasoline vouchers.
9. The monthly average of donations received in 2005 was \$2,869. The monthly average spent to meet emergency needs was \$2,908.

## **Hospitality House**

1. Hospitality House is a non-profit volunteer organization that provides shelter for homeless individuals in the Nevada City and Grass Valley areas. It was instituted in October 2005 to provide overnight housing through the coldest months of the year, October – April. Hospitality House operates a Welcome Center which serves as an intake gathering place that is opened to the homeless at 4 pm, seven days a week. Clients can do laundry and take showers at the Welcome Center. At 6 pm they are bused to a local church where they are provided a meal and sleeping arrangements. Breakfast is provided in the morning before they are returned to the Welcome Center.
2. A nine member volunteer Board of Directors oversees the program. Hospitality House has a paid staff of five, which includes a Program Manager and employees who stay overnight at each church. Hospitality House often has the assistance of a nurse and an occasional volunteer social worker.
3. Hospitality House is supported by the faith-based community including 20 participating churches, eight of which are able to provide overnight accommodations. These and many community volunteers provide meals and social interaction with the clients.
4. Hospitality House received a \$1,000 start-up grant. Ongoing funds come from private individuals, the faith-based community, and service clubs.
5. An average of 18 clients participate nightly, some of whom are children. As many as 27 individuals have been provided shelter in one night. The program can accommodate a maximum of 30 clients each night.
6. When possible, Hospitality House refers homeless to County agencies. Many homeless do not have transportation or the resources to follow-up with public assistance.
7. Hospitality House is seeking a new location for the Welcome Center in a non-residential area accessible to public transportation.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

1. Homelessness in Nevada County is not an individual city or community issue; it is a regional issue. Regardless of why people are homeless, the fact remains that we have a segment of our population, many of whom are children, who do not have a place to live. Their first recourse is the Nevada County Department of Social Services. Temporary assistance and shelter is available from volunteer organizations, which include the Emergency Assistance Coalition and Hospitality House.
2. A positive attitude toward the homeless is needed to continue raising funds to provide needed services.
3. Substance abuse, lack of affordable housing, and low-paying entry-level employment opportunities are barriers to those who are trying to become self-sufficient.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The Nevada County Department of Social Services and the Nevada County Housing Development Corporation should continue to encourage and cooperate with self-financed private service groups such as Hospitality House and the Emergency Assistance Coalition. These groups provide unique and needed services to our homeless citizens and to those who need temporary assistance through a difficult or unforeseen situation, and thereby extend the reach of county-funded social services.
2. Law enforcement agencies should continue to refer those in need to Hospitality House and the Emergency Assistance Coalition, whichever is appropriate for the need.
3. To the extent possible, law and government agencies should ensure that homeless citizens are integrated into our larger community without casting them as a threat to business or the community.

## **RESPONSES**

None