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Lynn's homeless count a mission of mercy

By Robin Kaminski/The Daily Item

LYNN - In the midst of a bitter cold snap, volunteers and Lynn Shelter employees plan to walk the streets this Wednesday night on a mission to find and document the homeless struggling to survive in the city.

"It's always cold, always nasty out there, but this is the time of year when we can find out who is really in need," said Shelter Association Director Marjorie St. Paul. "It's amazing some of the places that you find people in."

The count is set to take place from 10 p.m., to 1 a.m., with St. Paul and a group of others casing certain parts of the city — cemeteries, beaches and a U-Haul lot on the Lynnway, where the homeless have been known to flock. However, with such bitterly cold temperatures forecast for this week, St. Paul said it's likely that the number of homeless actually found on the streets will diminish, while the number of those staying overnight at the shelter will increase.

"The snow is really harsh this year, so that will make a huge difference with the people on the streets at night," she said. "The shelter is usually first come, first serve, but when we get this level of cold outside, we'll take you even if it means you're sitting in a chair in a hallway all night."

In 2010, there were 269 people documented as living in shelters, along with 116 families and 222 children. A total of 14 people were found living on the streets. In 2009, there were 280 people living in the shelters, with 81 families and 167 children. A higher number of those on the streets in 2009 were also documented, with 29 people, two families and eight children.

"Lynn's homeless are shadow people, they are very good at staying hidden, but we know where to look for them with the help of those who were once homeless themselves," she said.

Once this years information is collected, St. Paul said the figures will be passed on to the Lynn Housing Authority & Neighborhood Development (LHAND), which is then forwarded on to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

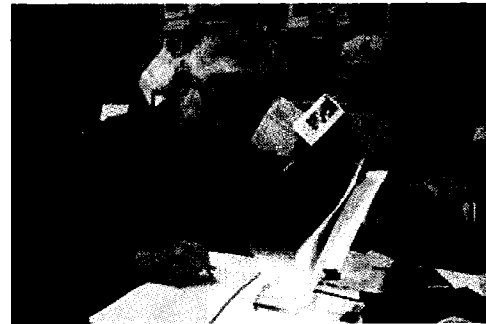
St. Paul said this year, HUD is looking for a few changes in the count, namely the way households are viewed and the way veterans are tracked and documented.

"Instead of looking at traditional households as adults and children, we are now looking at any unit that involves a child," she said. "A group of adolescents crashing together will count as a family with the oldest one considered the adult, or an adult that is with the group, but not related to the group. These are street families that come together."

Those types of families are then eligible for housing under certain HUD regulations, according to St. Paul, if they agree to start working with the organizations. The veteran change to the count is being geared toward finding out not just if they are veterans, but if they've ever been in active duty or with the National Guard. Those specifics questions St. Paul said, will help vets realize they are worthy of the help even if they think they aren't.

"We try to say, look, we can get you stuff, money, potential housing, medical help, but we're not going to make you do anything that you don't want to do," she said. "And after that, a lot of them actually show up so that they can get the things that they need."

In the past, St. Paul said Dunkin' Donuts and Wendy's gift cards were handed out to the homeless so they could get a



Marjorie St. Paul looks through data from last year's homeless count in her office last Wednesday. (Item Photo / Reba M. Saldanha)

quick bite to eat and warm up without getting kicked out. Blankets and other assorted goodies are also handed out each year.

Those interested in volunteering or donating gift cards are urged to call 781-581-0739 ext. 1.

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