

Area's hungry, homeless see stepped-up relief

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She takes down names and hands out groceries to the men, women and families who've found themselves living out of their cars or otherwise in need of a small bag of food.



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Volunteers Josh Wolfinger, left, and Douglas Veronda collect and bag food for the Loves and Fishes food bank program in Ocean Beach before distributing it to the area's homeless and hungry population.

Leigh Ann Bearce, who coordinates a handful of volunteers at the Loaves and Fishes food bank inside Holy Trinity Church in Ocean Beach packs plastic grocery bags full of goodies like Slim Jims, peanut butter, bread and tuna for people struggling through tough times. Loaves and Fishes even offers soap and shampoo.

With the help of different groups of volunteers, Bearce has been with the Loaves and Fishes program since November 2006 handing out food every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The program has existed for 30 years in churches throughout Ocean Beach.

But over the last year, the type of people coming through her door has changed as the national and local economy has taken a dive.

"I see more families now," she said. "I can't give you an exact number but it's increased."



On this day, just after being interviewed, Bearce opens the doors of the Loaves and Fishes to yet another family in need.

A mother corralled her two children behind her as she carried the youngest in her arms. The toddler wore only a diaper made from a small, striped beach towel fastened around his waist with a shoelace.

The man with them clutched a manila folder full of papers to his chest as he tailed them. He didn't seem to want to talk.

Counting the number of homeless families and individuals in San Diego is the job of the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless. Every January for the last four years, the private nonprofit group has counted individual homeless people across San Diego County.

About 400 task force volunteers count heads over a four-hour period throughout the 18 cities in the county, according to Kiefer Rich, the task force's project manager. Volunteers enter the numbers into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) used by the city and county to apply for housing grants.

As of January 2008, the task force reported at least 7,582 homeless individuals throughout the county. But there's probably more than that, Rich said.

The San Diego State University (SDSU) Institute of Public Health hasn't released this year's numbers yet, but Rich said numbers are "relatively similar." He expects a preliminary report from SDSU within a month.

Arriving at an exact number remains a difficult task, Rich said. Families underreport homelessness out of fear and the social stigma associated with homelessness.

"You can imagine what it's like trying to find people who don't want to be found," he said. "A lot of families are hesitant to fill out a survey, because they might run into problems with the law (such as Child Protective Services)."

While service providers find it difficult counting minors, families and individuals who don't want to be found, the group does have success tracking others.

Military veterans still make up a significant portion of the region's homeless population. According to the 2008 task force survey, veterans comprise one-sixth of the population in need of housing.

Since 1981, the Veteran's Village of San Diego (VVSD) on Pacific Highway has provided transitional housing, job and medical resources for veterans. About 146 veterans currently live in the housing near the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, according to VVSD CEO Phil Landis.

The village is in the middle of an expansion.

The city council approved about \$2.1 million in funding on May 5 to build another two-story transitional housing that can hold up to 96 beds as part of the final phase of expansion.

The affordable housing will be offered to veterans on a sliding scale, depending on their income, Landis said.

Landis has noticed many younger veterans returning from the current conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan have started to seek help at the VVSD, Landis said.

"It's heartbreaking, but that's the reality of it," Landis said.

The VVSD tracks individuals for about six months after participants complete a counseling or transitional housing program. Many find work to sustain themselves, Landis said.

"It takes remarkable courage and self determination but a large number successfully do that," Landis said.

Landis said the current fiscal crisis hasn't affected the VVSD. The group has not had to lay anyone off or shutter any programs. The VVSD, however, still needs to raise about \$1 million to complete the rest of the project and will hold fundraisers to do so.

Like the VVSD, several churches in the beach communities - including the Loaves and Fishes program in Ocean Beach - rely heavily on donations.

To help augment a limited food supply of Holy Trinity's Loaves and Fishes, the Point Loma Methodist Church will host a dual-benefit concert and spaghetti dinner Friday, May 15 at the Point Loma Methodist Church, 1984 Sunset Cliffs Blvd.

"We want to raise some money from the dinner and fill the cupboards up bursting

with food," Bill Joyce, president of the United Methodist Men's Fellowship. "This is a chance to raise money to buy supplies and food because they never have enough food."

The spaghetti dinner starts at 5:30 p.m. and costs \$5 per individual or \$15 per family. A classic rock concert will feature local musicians like Glen Fisher and the First Fridays Club, which is made up of elementary and middle school kids who know how to rock. A bag of canned food such as canned tuna, canned vegetables, canned fruit and peanut butter is the price of admission.

While proceeds from the spaghetti dinner will go to fill Loaves and Fishes coffers to buy needed items, the food will go directly to the organization's food chest.

The food will help individuals like Gus, a San Diego native who declined to give his last name.

After working in kitchens on the East Coast for several years, he returned to San Diego about four years ago. He soon found himself living out of a van in Ocean Beach.

Gus said while he is on the hunt for a job, the Loaves and Fishes program helps him get by.

"It really starts with getting a good meal," Gus said. "When people aren't eating right they start making bad decisions."

Those bad decisions can often lead homeless people to trespass onto private property or commit crimes to survive. The San Diego Police Department (SDPD) has a Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) that enforces the law and helps individuals get the resources they need, said SDPD Northern Division Capt. Shelley Zimmerman.

"It's not a crime to be homeless," Zimmerman said. "[But] business owners [can] authorize us to enforce any and all applicable laws so long as the business owners are involved in the prosecution."

HOT is scheduled to make a presentation to the La Jolla Town Council on Friday, May 15 at the La Jolla Town Recreation Center, 615 Prospect Place, from 5 to 6:30 p.m.

While business owners and residents call to complain about homelessness in every part of the city, Zimmerman said HOT and the department tries to help first.

"There's a lot of resources for them and we try to get them help," Zimmerman said. "But they have to be willing to take that help."

Sebastian Ruiz writes for The Peninsula Beacon where this article originally appeared.