

Jacksonville’s homelessness-prevention nonprofit seeking volunteers for census

By Beth Reese Cravey

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Every January, Changing Homelessness, the lead homelessness-prevention agency for Clay, Duval and Nassau counties, takes part in a nationwide census and survey of the homeless population. The information collected “is used to help assess how we are doing as a community, and as a nation, to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness,” according to the nonprofit.

When Laura Lane volunteered for Changing Homelessness’s Point In Time Count in 2018, she was a bit uncomfortable about the task at hand. So initially she let fellow volunteers with experience in the annual homeless count to take the lead.

“Approaching people in order to talk with them is delicate. I am so used to passing people and not looking them in the eye,” she said.

Lane had to start “paying attention to what I generally don’t pay attention to,” she said. “I basically stood alongside the person who had more experience than me and then when I felt comfortable talking with someone living on the street ... I took the clipboard and started asking questions.”

Building that comfort level is critical for a successful count — that’s why training is required for first-time volunteers and encouraged for everyone else. The next count is Jan. 22, training will be next week.

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Staff and volunteers visit areas in Clay, Duval and Nassau where homeless people congregate. In 2019 a total of 1,654 people were counted — 74 in Clay, 1,494 in Duval and 86 in Nassau — compared to 1,794 people in 2018, 1,869 in 2017 and 2,442 in 2009.

The 2020 numbers will be combined with 10-year trends and information from about 40 regional social service agencies that offer overnight emergency beds, transitional housing and supportive services. The resulting data shows how the numbers of homeless change over time, according to Changing Homelessness.

CEO Dawn Gilman said she expects the number of “unsheltered” people to rise in this year’s count, “based on what we see on the streets.”

“What we’re looking for ... is where you were last night,” she said.

About 200 staff and volunteers will survey 13 zones in Duval County, including the Beaches, and four to six zones each in Clay and Nassau counties.

Gilman said they will also check numbers that day at the city-funded Urban Rest Stop, which opened in February 2019 at the Sulzbacher center for the homeless in downtown Jacksonville. Operated Monday through Friday in partnership with the Mental Health Resource Center, the facility provides case management, showers, health care, meals and job assistance.

Training for the count helps volunteers establish a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental line of communication with the homeless people they encounter. Also, best practices and safety precautions are provided.

“Sometimes we do role-play to give them a little more comfort,” she said.

Lane said the experience opens participants’ eyes. After her volunteer work, she joined Changing Homelessness as a contracted employee in early 2019 and became a full-time staffer as community priorities and innovations coordinator in October.

“I began to see all the different places that people hide themselves away to sleep. Behind signs or bushes. Close to a building and out-of-sight,” she said. “I also remember talking with people just as they woke up and they were gracious and interested. Way more kind than me when I wake up!”

Gilman had a request of people who cannot participate but want to support the cause: Encourage state lawmakers to preserve the Sadowski Housing Trust Fund. Money in the fund is supposed to be dedicated to build affordable housing, but is frequently diverted to other uses.

Affordable housing — for homeless people and for the working poor — is in limited supply in Northeast Florida and nationwide, according to Gilman and other local homeless advocates.

Developers cannot afford to build more without financial incentives, which typically come from government, they said.

Article last accessed on January 6, 2020 [here](#).