

Chico Enterprise-Record (<http://www.chicoer.com>)

## County homeless point in time count sees great turnout

*By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record*

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Sharing their stories today means the county has a better idea of how to help them tomorrow.

The homeless point in time survey provides Butte County service providers with a snapshot of what homelessness is like in the community — this year it was a chilly Wednesday in January, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. at spots across the county, including Chico, Oroville, Paradise, Magalia and Gridley.

In Chico alone there were about 12 sheltering organizations, 20 static sites and 50 in-field locations where volunteers were interviewing homeless people and completing surveys.

The results, likely released in May, help Butte County compete for federal and state funding to provide housing and other services for those without a home.

While the survey is mandated by the federal government, service providers expanded the questions asked this year to give them a better idea about what's going on locally. New questions included how people became homeless, what barriers they are facing, what they believe they need to become stably housed, monetary resources they have and how they acquire money, and their feelings about any ordinances that affect their lives, like Chico's sit and lie ordinance and offenses against public property ordinance.

Siana Sonoquie, Jesus Center volunteer, said everybody was in good spirits about the anonymous survey, which provides respondents with a \$5 grocery store card as an added incentive.

"I think everybody knows what it's for," she said Wednesday afternoon. "Everybody is excited to have a voice."

By 9:30 a.m., the Jesus Center already had 100 people who responded to the survey, many for the first time, Sonoquie said.

Jesus Center Executive Director Laura Cootsona said the data collected from the surveys not only helps the county secure grant money for services but allows for agency collaboration to make sure they're not "missing key components that impede people and elongate their homelessness."

"It gives us real data about who it is that's experiencing the impacts of homelessness, what barriers they're facing and what their specific needs are," she said.

Abbey Hernandez, a Chico State University social work graduate student, was giving surveys to people Wednesday morning at different locations in Chico, including the City Plaza. She was motivated to get involved this year to meet people experiencing homelessness, hear their stories and offer them help.

"Out of everyone I've interviewed today, nobody said it's because they want to be homeless," she said. Reasons she heard as to why people found themselves without a permanent home included evictions, job loss, mental

illness, substance abuse, domestic violence or a combination of those things.

People were very open, sharing stories that weren't even required for the survey, she said.

"Things like this are a good way to build empathy for community members," she said. "People don't always understand that homelessness isn't a choice."

Trina Wauchope, a 33-year-old mother of three, found herself homeless a few months ago and is staying at the Torres Shelter, now 70 days sober. She said the survey asked good questions and it wasn't too nosy. She's hopeful the surveyors were able to help people get connected to services they needed.

"A lot of people don't know a lot about the housing opportunities or resources," she said. "I know a lot of people they appreciate it."

Dillon Bohan, 41, has been homeless three times in his life, most recently for a little more than a year. Though the veteran recently found himself back in Chico, he often visited family there and in Biggs. While he took a survey at the Jesus Center, he shared many of his experiences, some involving family troubles and acts of domestic violence committed against him. He said he has bipolar disorder, has been through substance abuse rehabilitation twice and was involved in two burglaries when he was in his teens and 20s, which is sometimes an impediment to securing housing.

Bohan said he felt that the survey's questions were actually less probing than questions asked in job applications. He was originally reserved about sharing his experiences because he feels others have it much worse than he does, he said, and expressed gratitude for local service providers like the Jesus Center.

"It's good to give your take on it and share your story," he said. "All people are important."

Volunteer and college student Sara Whitchurch said she appreciated how open people in the homeless community were.

Fellow college student and volunteer Rio Gardner said the experience was really eye-opening not only for first time volunteers but for the entire community. A lot of people judge homeless people based upon the reasons they think they became homeless, she said, and those reasons are usually not the case.

The pair were very polite when giving surveys at the Jesus Center, and offered help whenever they could to direct people to services already available in the community.

Point in time survey coordinator Sherisse Allen said the community has really shown up to help make the point in time count a success. At the mid-day training in Chico last week, volunteers were lined up down the street, standing in the rain.

"In fact, every training that we have held, in every community, has exceeded what we expected," she said. "I attribute that to our amazing community members who are driven to help those in such obvious, ongoing need."

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