

St. Petersburg Times

GROUP: PINELLAS HOMELESS COUNT UP

Thursday, September 30, 2004

Pinellas group's count shows more homeless people

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Published September 30, 2004

The Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project shelter used to turn away six families every week. Now it's telling as many as five families a day they have to go elsewhere.

The count of homeless people in Pinellas County has nearly doubled in the past year, according to the Pinellas County Coalition for the Homeless. The group counted 4,081 homeless people this year, up from 2,305 in 2003.

A countywide task force will start meeting next week to address the situation.

The group, comprising elected officials and community representatives, will develop and implement a 10-year plan to end homelessness. More than 100 cities are creating such plans. President Bush has made it a national goal to end chronic homelessness in a decade.

Advocates for the homeless say the economy, an affordable housing shortage and the lack of a living wage contribute to the numbers.

Also a factor in the increase: The homeless coalition canvassed motels, day labor camps and street locations this year. Before, the group had only included homeless people at soup kitchens and shelters.

The survey found nearly 54 percent of the homeless had been in the county for a year or more.

"It dispelled the myth of a transient population coming in here for the nice weather and then leaving," said Ed Brant, president of the coalition and executive director of CHIP. "(We) need to come up with a plan for our citizens."

To help produce the plan, the coalition plans to raise \$97,500 for a professional staffer who would serve as its executive director for 18 months. The group's 70-plus members are all volunteers.

Pinellas County said it will contribute \$65,000, and St. Petersburg and Clearwater have committed to providing \$10,833 each.

The only holdout has been Largo. But after hearing a presentation from the homeless coalition Tuesday night, Largo commissioners voiced their support and asked city staff to identify potential funding options.

"My first inclination is to stick my head in the ground and ignore this, but we can't," said Largo Commissioner Charlie Harper.

Pinellas County and the Juvenile Welfare Board also are paying a consultant \$39,000 to make recommendations on how to address homelessness. The consultant will help the task force devise the 10-year plan.

Cliff Smith, assistant director of Pinellas County Human Services, said county commissioners have been getting complaints from residents about panhandling and other problems associated with the homeless population.

Brant said he has seen an increase in the newly homeless.

In addition, more than 31,000 families in Pinellas County are below the poverty level and considered at risk of becoming homeless, Brant said. A person must earn \$14.50 an hour to rent a two-bedroom apartment in the county, he said.

"We can talk all day about ending homelessness, but that's not a reality in Pinellas County because there's not enough affordable housing," said Beth Eschenfelder, president of the Florida Coalition for the Homeless.

The 10-year plan, which could help local governments attract additional state and federal funding, should be finalized in about a year.

It will likely focus on finding permanent housing for the homeless, and then providing support services such as day care and mental health counseling to keep them there. In addition, financial help with rent and utility payments could be offered.