

Volunteers interview hundreds of people on the streets in Salem area



Ignoring the cold to count homeless

The morning of the annual “Point-in-Time” homeless count dawned cloudless, but cold. ■ As temperatures dipped below freezing Wednesday, Maria Baker, 41, slept in a travel trailer with her partner Dave West, 52, near Walling Pond in southeast Salem. ■ After losing her job as an in-home caregiver, Baker found herself homeless five years ago. She lived in shelters. She slept in cars. Now pregnant, she is on a waiting list for housing, but isn’t sure whether she’ll have a roof over her head by the time her baby arrives in June. ■ “Not every one of us are out here because we want to be,” she says. “We’re trying to get off the street. We try ... but it’s hard. It’s really hard.” ■ Baker and West were among the hundreds of people interviewed as part of the annual Point-in-Time homeless count conducted by the nonprofit Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency across Salem and surrounding areas.

See **HOMELESS**, Page 4A

Our Homeless Crisis

An occasional series by the Statesman Journal on homelessness in Marion and Polk counties.

■ See the entire series at Statesman-Journal.com/homeless.

Maria Baker, 41, from left, Cheyanne West, 24, and Dave West, 52, give their information to volunteer Lorrie Walker during the annual Point-in-Time homeless count in Salem on Wednesday. The number of people counted helps local programs qualify for federal funds. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Homeless

CONTINUED FROM HOMELESS ON PAGE [A1](#)

Continued from Page 1A

Information gathered helps local agencies secure federal dollars, as well as understand the causes of homelessness.

The PIT count is mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing if local programs want to receive federal funds to combat homelessness.

The count must be executed within 24 hours on a single day. HUD requires it be done within the last 10 days of January because it's the coldest time of year and more people are likely to be seeking shelter.

The thought is it gives communities a more accurate snapshot of homelessness at its peak.

Information gathered helps local agencies secure federal dollars, as well as understand the causes of homelessness and identify gaps in current services.

"It is in many ways a limiting count because it leaves a lot of people out," says Action Agency Director Jimmy Jones. "It leaves people out who are couching. It leaves people out who are living in their cousin's basement or garage. It leaves out a 6-year-old girl who's going to school and staying with her grandmother. It's leaving out a lot of people that most people would regard as homeless."

But the goal of the count is to get an idea of how many people are living in "Category 1" homelessness — people living in their car, camping

shelters since then. His sleeping bag was stolen a few days ago, something he insists was his fault for leaving it unattended.

He maintains his luck will turn around soon.

"I just have to find a job," Parker says.

Outside, John Yarbough, 57, and Leonard Wales, 59, are just waking up.

The pair slept sitting up in a van with "Wanted bottles and cans. Thank you!" written on the window.

Yarbough says he's been in Salem his whole life.

"I grew up just two blocks from here," he says.

After getting sick two years ago, he lost his house in a family dispute, leaving him and his roommate Wales on the street. He never thought he'd be in this situation — never imagined the constant struggle of staying safe and finding a place to sleep.

"People need to look at homelessness a little differently," Yarbough says. "Instead of saying 'you're homeless,' why can't we say 'you're experiencing homelessness'?"

He said the sheer number of people living without a home in Salem is shocking, and the rise in theft and property damage is alarming.

"People are scared out here," he says.

'Everybody has a story'

Before she volunteered with the PIT count, Watson remembers passing

size of the homeless population.

"We did a great job in the city of Salem, we did a less great job in Polk County and we had done a not spectacular job at all in rural Marion," he said during a meeting with volunteers Monday.

"We've tried to consistently continue to improve and get better and last year, as the result of all the efforts of the folks in this room, we had the single best point in time count in the last 10 years in the community," he told the crowd. "It puts us in a much better position as we are going into this next legislative session to help attract more resources in this community."

During the 2018 PIT count, advocated gathered data from 1,218 homeless people and gave several insights into the make-up and needs of the homeless community.

The count revealed that 84 percent of the homeless population surveyed were white, 40 percent were female, 24 percent had a serious mental illness and 37 percent were chronically homeless.

Of those interviewed, 164 were children under 18, 316 had a substance abuse disorder and just over half were unsheltered.

Getting an accurate count isn't just important in terms of funding, Jones said.

"It's important because it allows us to get the resources to make a real difference in people's lives," he said.

In the past 18 months, chronically homelessness in Salem has gone down 15 to 20 percent.

in tents at Wallace Marine Park or sleeping outside across the city. It also includes a count of people staying in local shelters.

The homeless count begins

George Waltz, 56, spent one of the coldest nights of the year sleeping outside.

Now he's sitting inside the warm lobby of the Jack in the Box restaurant on Mission Street, nursing a cup of coffee and talking with volunteer Lorrie Walker.

This is his second time in Salem. He's been here for about five months and tends to avoid shelters and downtown.

"I've just been on my own," Waltz says.

After asking him a list of questions required by the count — whether he has an addiction, mental illness or physical disabilities — she asks, "Is there anything you need today?"

He mulls it over and replies, a tarp would be nice.

Walker makes a quick call and tells Waltz someone is on their way to pick him up and take him to Church at the Park for food and clothes.

Walker and fellow volunteer Pamella Watson met at Church at the Park Wednesday morning to gather sack lunches, sleeping bags, toiletries, socks and dog food.

The dozen volunteers were tasked with interviewing as many people experiencing homelessness as possible near Cascades Gateway Park.

Both Walker and Watson have volunteered for about five years and planned to visit their usual spots — the parking lot outside the now-

by a homeless man and his dog alongside a road.

She wondered what his history was.

"Everybody has a story," she says.

She later met the man during her first PIT count and learned he spiraled into homelessness after suffering a work injury. It was something that could happen to anyone, she thought.

"It just got to my heart so much," she says. "I want to know more about the people and know about their stories and how they ended up where they were."

She and Walker met with Aaron Webber, 43, and Cheyanne West, 24, outside their van parked next to her father's travel trailer at Walling Pond.

Webber proudly shows the alterations he's made to make the van more liveable, adding in a power strip for charging electronics, a closet for hanging clothes and play space for their 6-week-old miniature pinscher Coda.

He works the graveyard shift in sanitation and plans to move to Bakersfield, California, where housing is cheaper and he has a job waiting for him at Foster Farms.

Cheyanne West became homeless after fleeing domestic violence. Now living with Webber in the van, she says she feels safe.

Watson and Walker offer her some dog food for Coda. West gratefully accepts.

"We're on our last little bag of dog food," she says.

West says the couple works to clean up the area and keep it nice.

Jones added that the counts have a true impact on the community.

He recounted the effects of last year's count.

A chronically homeless woman with mental illness, a drug addiction and severe health problems was able to get into housing after spending the last 15 years pushing a shopping cart around Salem and sleeping outside.

A 22-year-old sex trafficking and abuse victim lured from Phoenix up to Oregon found a home.

And a 6-year-old girl living in Wallace Marine Park for a year was discovered during last year's count. She and her family have now been in housing for almost a year.

"The amount of good that comes out of this work and out of this volunteer effort is just absolutely enormous," Jones said.

Capi Lynn of the Statesman Journal contributed to this report.

For questions, comments and news tips, email reporter Whitney Woodworth at wwoodwort@statesmanjournal.com, call 503-399-6884 or follow on Twitter @wwoodworth



George Waltz, 56, gives his information to volunteer Lorrie Walker inside the Jack In The Box on Mission Street SE during the annual Point-in-Time homeless count in Salem on

shuttered Kmart, the gravel lot near Walling Pond and cars parked roadside in industrial areas.

After 30 years of working with patients at Oregon State Hospital, Walker wanted to connect with those in the community experience mental health crises and homelessness.

“It bothers me how broken the system is,” she says.

The retired mental health worker also volunteers at emergency warming shelters and has built a rapport with many in the community.

“They trust me,” she says. “They know me.”

As Walker speaks with Waltz, Watson chats with Kevin Parker, 57, at a nearby table.

She tries to talk him into visiting Church at the Park for a meal and supplies.

He frets. He doesn't want to impose on the church, but eventually joins Waltz.

Parker lost his home in 2009 and has been living on the streets and various

“You don't have to be trashy,” she says. “Where you live, respect your home.”

Dave West has been homeless for eight years. He says many people in the community are looking for a “hand up, not a handout.”

“Everybody has a story and it's not just drugs or alcohol,” he says. “It could just easily be losing a job. There are some people who are just a paycheck away from being evicted from their house or losing it from foreclosure.”

As the volunteers return to their car, Walker remembers it's Watson's birthday.

“It's her birthday!” she shouts to the group still clustered around the van.

“Happy birthday!” they shout back.

Watson says she can't imagine spending it in a better place.

Why the homeless count matters

The count is important not only because of its effect on national policy but also for its direct financial impact on local communities, Jones said.

In Oregon, state funding formulas rely heavily on the yearly homeless count.

Jones said that historically, PIT counts have struggled to fully capture the

Wednesday. The number of people counted helps local programs qualify for federal funds to combat homelessness.

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