

How many homeless at one point in time? Volunteers put boots on the ground

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Jess Lucero, an associate professor of Social Work, recruits her students to work on the 2019 Point in Time Count of homeless individuals in the tri-county area of Cache, Box Elder and Rich counties. She is one of this year's organizers.

By the time dawn sweeps through, they're largely gone, pretty much invisible.

Driving to work, you could easily pull up next to her. Or he may be the nice guy holding the door open at the convenience store.

That's why, when volunteers gather next week for the annual Point-in-Time Homelessness Count, they'll be wiping away 3 a.m. zzzz's. That pre-dawn span, when the rest of us are home in bed, is the ideal time to identify those people without a home or bed and instead living on the streets or in cars.

"Folks in Cache Valley don't think we see much homelessness, and it's because we really don't," said Jess Lucero, an associate professor of Social Work. "They go somewhere else during the day, or they figure out a way to not be visible."

The Point-in-Time count continues for three days next week: 3:30 a.m.-6 a.m. Jan. 24; and 4 a.m.-6 a.m. Jan. 25 and 26. It's organized by the Bear River Association of Governments and the Local Homeless Coordinating Council, overseeing Cache, Box Elder and Rich counties. Similar counts will occur in counties across Utah, as well as nationwide.

Lucero, a member of the Local Homeless Coordinating Council, said the count is "critical" because it determines state and federal dollars that flow to local agencies, said Lucero. Beyond that, "it's an assessment tool for us to say, 'All right, what is the extent of this issue in our community.'"

Last year, about 50 volunteers — students, social-services professionals and area residents — signed up for the actual physical search. Volunteers will be divided into teams to investigate assigned areas most likely to include homeless individuals.

"It's just about capacity, boots on the ground and in cars, driving and looking," said Lucero. "The more volunteers we have, the further we can stretch out into our county."

The 2018 count came to 84 individuals (and 31 households) across the three counties. The number includes the chronically homeless, those "who are at really high risk of continuing to be homeless because of co-occurring issues like substance abuse, severe and persistent mental illness," said Lucero.

Most, though, fall into the category of "situational homelessness," Lucero said. "This looks like, maybe you're now two months behind on rent, you have some huge economic disaster in your family and you can't pay. You're evicted — and now you have a poor rental history and, in a tight rental market like right now, you are so unlikely to secure housing."

Also counted among the homeless are domestic-violence survivors at the emergency shelters CAPSA in Logan and New Hope Crisis Center in Brigham City.

"Yes, they're housed," explained Lucero. "But they don't have a home outside of the shelter, an actual residence that for many reasons they had to leave and now can't go back to."

Volunteers must attend an hour-long mandatory training at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 22. Volunteers will be trained on how to engage, assess and refer, said Lucero. They also carry kits that include warm clothing.

"It's a really humbling experience," said Lucero. "And while it's important for determining funds, it's just one of those experiences — it's eye opening."

The training will be broadcast to several locations. More information and the volunteer form are available at https://servicecenter.usu.edu/storyfeed/point_in_time_2019.

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