

Volunteers begin homeless count in Fresno/Madera counties

By Carmen George



About 100 volunteers gathered at Millbrook Presbyterian Church on Tuesday evening to prepare for starting to count Fresno homeless through the Fresno Madera Continuum of Care. About 30 volunteers are counting homeless in Madera County. CARMEN GEORGE — THE FRESNO BEE

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Volunteers began counting homeless people in Fresno and Madera counties on Tuesday evening as part of a three-day initiative aimed at better understanding the homeless and helping get more individuals off the streets.



About 130 volunteers will be counting and interviewing homeless persons through Thursday night under the umbrella of the Fresno Madera Continuum of Care, a coalition of groups that provide homeless services and housing.



The count is required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development every two years — although for several years Fresno has had a count every year to maintain the updated data for homeless initiatives. The data help qualify the continuum for federal funding for homeless programs.

Jody Ketcheside, a spokeswoman for the Fresno Madera Continuum of Care, said volunteers recorded around 2,500 homeless in Fresno and Madera counties during last year's count.

Ketcheside said the region's homeless population appears to have decreased 25-30% over the past couple years. She credits the drop to Fresno's participation in a few campaigns — namely 100,000 Homes and the 25 Cities Initiative — that are aimed at reducing homelessness.

Still, there's more work to be done.

Volunteer Brooke Ashjian, a real estate developer and Fresno Unified School District board member, said Fresno Unified serves about 2,400 homeless students.

On Tuesday evening, Ashjian was getting ready to start counting homeless individuals with his wife, daughter and sister-in-law. Check-in was 4 p.m. for Fresno volunteers, who gathered at Millbrook Presbyterian Church in central Fresno.

Of the count, Ashjian said, "It's extremely, extremely important ... It's a very, very big deal for Fresno to know who our brothers and sisters are, where they are at, and — how do we serve them?"

Volunteers will ask homeless people what they think contributes to their situations, and if they have substance abuse or mental health problems. Ashjian said people often see the homeless as having addiction problems when most are actually mentally ill, which then can drive addiction.

Ketcheside said volunteers were assigned to all of the city's zip codes, Clovis and rural county areas. She said Fresno County has about 100 volunteers and Madera County has about 30. Volunteers were to be out until 10 p.m. Tuesday, and will head out again at 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Thursday.

Gabriela McNeil, a spokeswoman for the Poverello House, was proud to be among those volunteers Tuesday evening. She said because of initiatives like the three-day count, Fresno is often viewed as a leader in curbing homelessness.

Said McNeil, "As far as homelessness goes, we are doing some things right."

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