



## With the homeless, it's lack of numbers that tell the story

*Editor's note: This is the first in a series of Sunday stories dealing with the issue of homeless people in Citrus County. Next Sunday the Chronicle will provide a profile of the homeless in our county.*

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If there's truth in numbers, here is a truth about the homeless: They're invisible.

No one, it seems, has an accurate number of homeless people in Citrus County, in Florida or even the United States.

The Census Bureau does not count the homeless. It has no category for homelessness.

The state government, which relies on hard figures to dole out money for programs and grants, relies on estimates given by service providers or a mathematical equation that does not take into account factors such as the economy, family size or the weather.

Unlike in cities the scale of Orlando or Tampa, in Citrus County the homeless generally are not seen. They sleep in shelters or the state forest.

Experts who provide services to the homeless in Citrus County admit the lack of an accurate count is frustrating, because they know these people exist, yet are helpless to get



**“The problem is just too enormous.”**

**DuWayne Sipper**  
director of The Path shelter in Beverly Hills.

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# HOMELESS

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much government help for them.

"They're not very visible," said Capt. Larry Ballard of the Salvation Army of Citrus County. "Visible homelessness is not a problem. If you've got homeless guys sleeping on the doorsteps of your business, that's a problem that has to be taken care of."

The Mid Florida Homeless Coalition, a five-county group established by the state Legislature, does annual reports on the numbers of homeless.

The official estimated daily homeless population count for Citrus County: 416.

But Valerie Seaton, director of community services for the coalition, admits that number has no foundation.

"I know what we're sending out is not a true, accurate picture," she said.

The coalition, which operates under the auspices of the Department of Children and Families District 13, must present the report annually to Tallahassee.

Service providers, such as the Salvation Army, private shelters and Marion-Citrus Mental Health, receive detailed questionnaires from the coalition that is designed to not only count the homeless, but create a profile of their needs.

This year, only one of five District 13 counties completed the survey and sent it back. The others didn't because providers, such as DuWayne Sipper, said completing the survey would have been too time-consuming.

"All our funds are down, and now you're asking me to ask a volunteer to fill out all this paperwork? It's not going to happen," said Sipper, who runs The Path shelter in Beverly Hills.

Without the survey results,

the state's formula for determining numbers of homeless. The formula is this: county's estimated population multiplied by 0.00362.

Seaton said she knows that formula isn't an accurate gauge of homelessness.

"I'd prefer they send the stuff back," she said of the surveys. "We're thinking maybe this is too overwhelming for people, so we're trying to condense it."

The significance of accurate numbers is strictly on funding, Sipper and others said. The system hurts rural counties even more, he said.

"To get the grants, they want to see those hard numbers," he said. "The problem is, you'll never have those hard numbers unless you have an official rescue mission. But to do that, you need money."

Citrus County's private shelters are faith-based and receive no tax money. Homeless advocates are considering forming a Citrus County coalition to have a better grasp on solving the homeless issue locally.

Maureen Wilson, president of Florida Low Income Housing Inc., said the local coalition could raise awareness of what many believe is a non-

existent problem.

"I'm on the Path board, and I see how they're struggling with raising finances and getting local support," she said. "It's not what we perceive as homeless. It's women and children, and we see it every day. There are other people trying to meet those needs, and if we can pull together as a group, then there's a voice there."

Sipper, incidentally, believes the estimate of 416 homeless in Citrus County is high.

"But again, it's really hard to count," he said. "There's no way to know how many women and children are sleeping on someone's couch. The problem is just too enormous. We feel overwhelmed at times and I'm sure so do the others."

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**DuWayne Sipper**  
The Path of Citrus County.

# Perseverance pays for homeless advocate

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*Chronicle*

When an intense 35-year-old man in wire-rimmed spectacles stood up at a county commission meeting in June 1997 and suggested that the then-vacant jail in downtown Inverness be given to provide a Christian living environment for anyone in Citrus County without a home, he was politely received but given a frigid shoulder.

DuWayne Sipper, who just turned 40, says he was amazed at his boldness, but by that time he had given over his life to serving his savior, Jesus Christ.

Despite that setback, and several others, his efforts have not slackened and he has seen some remarkable success trying to help the homeless of Citrus County, due in part, he says, to his use of the *Chronicle* newspapers.

He said that *Chronicle* stories have informed him of opportunities to buy a thrift store in Inverness, property in Lecanto and — with a successful classified advertisement — his organization, The Path of Citrus County Inc., has received significant donations including the defunct Pirates Cove restaurant in Ozello, which was donated to The Path.

The resale of that property for \$150,000, he said, combined with a \$20,000 donation from an anonymous donor (and personal friend of his) made the purchase of two shelter homes in Beverly Hills possible.



DuWayne Sipper  
director of  
The Path,  
Beverly Hills.

Today he runs a two-house homeless shelter in Beverly Hills, and says he is still serving his Lord in the best way he knows how. While he talks to a reporter, a young man with a shaved head stands in another room, talking to his mother on a cell phone.

Sipper's office and living quarters are in one room in the men's house: a bed and three desks with stacks of files and books.

"There's a lot of paperwork involved in running a nonprofit business," he said. "The IRS 990, for example.

"Then there are the grants. Grant applications can be as thick as a county telephone book. I have folders on foundations that might have money for us, but it takes time and lots of work to put an application together."

He picks up another sheaf of papers.

"We keep records on each client. Most of them are single mothers with children separated from their spouses. Most of our clients are from here — Citrus County.

"I wasn't trained as a manager, but I have had to teach myself, because there is a lot of accountability these days."

Holding out a pack of official forms he is preparing for his annual audit, he said Florida's department of consumer affairs, for example, requires a complete accounting of money that comes in and money that gets spent.

Sipper wasn't always a man with a mission.

He grew up in a Navy family. His father was a Russian language specialist who served at out-of-the-way listening posts around the then-Soviet Union, so the young Sipper didn't permanently live in the United States until his teens. When his father retired from the Navy, DuWayne was 18. He had graduated from high school with good grades, but while living in Miami, he got involved with drugs and was arrested for selling marijuana.

He said he spent eight days in jail, but because he was a first-offender, he was put on three years' probation and took a job in a factory making conveyor equipment, where he learned to work with electricity. He tried college twice, but grew restless and withdrew.

Good with numbers, he devised a method to win at jai alai. For a time, he became a devotee of Maharaji, an Indian-born teacher with many followers in South Florida. He took a job driving rich people like Donald Trump and the Rolling Stones around in limousines in Palm Beach.

Then his life started to crumble. He grew ill, had seizures, heard loud rushing sounds in his ears, had headaches and felt nauseous for days on end. Before he came to Citrus County, he began reading the Bible for seven or eight hours a day. After he moved here to live with his father, he met the Rev. Larry Brincefield at the Church of the Nazarene in Hernando, and came to know Christ. As he healed inside and out, he began to volunteer and to gather information about the needs of people in Citrus County.

"I thought about the homeless and asked where they were sheltered. I called around and everybody said there wasn't any place to put them," he said. "I remember calling the sheriff's office and speaking to a sergeant who laughed when I asked where they were taken."

He said the sergeant said: "When you get one going, let me know."

Since then he says his life has become transformed and from that time, too, he has witnessed many miracles and felt the hand of God working to assist him and others in their efforts to help people without homes get back on their feet.

These days his energies are taken up administering an organization that makes him earn his \$19,000 a year salary.

In addition to the daunting paperwork, there is the challenge of meeting the day-to-day needs of the men and women who come to the shelter, helping them find jobs and more permanent shelter.

He is also praying to stimulate donations to keep the shelters running and to find new, committed, Christian board members who can grow community support.

"We are also hoping that women from a church might want to volunteer to act as mentors in the women's shelter," he said. "That's where our biggest need is right now."