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CITRUS TIMES

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County attempts to

■ Although a survey taken today and Monday will be a rough count at best, the effort is needed to receive funding and resources to fight homelessness.

By COLLEEN JENKINS
Times Staff Writer

In an effort to better serve the county's homeless population, Citrus homeless advocates are setting out today and Monday to quantify for the first time how many people are without shelter.

The county's homeless coalition will conduct a

point-in-time survey, in this case a six-page questionnaire designed by the state homeless coalition to be handed out to those people known or thought to be homeless. Volunteers will target the county's three shelters, soup kitchens at churches and any spots where the homeless might seek work.

They will estimate Citrus' homeless population with the responses they receive both this morning and Monday morning. It will be a rough count at best, coordinators said, but the effort is necessary to receive funding and resources to fight homelessness.

"This is something that we've got to do," said DuWayne Sipper, executive director of The Path homeless shelter.

count its homeless

He's also an executive board member of the Mid-Florida Homeless Coalition executive board, which serves Citrus, Hernando, Lake and Sumter counties. All member counties plan to conduct similar surveys.

"It helps us get points when we go down to put our grants in," he said.

But Sipper and other coordinators said the survey is worth more than the numbers it will produce. Survey organizer Mary Lee Cubbison said service providers are trying to learn more about who constitutes the county's homeless population.

The survey asks questions about an individual's last home, family, employment, income and what

caused his or her homelessness. The possible reasons are plentiful: unemployment, divorce, eviction, mental health or physical problems, lack of child care or transportation.

"There's so much misunderstanding about who (homeless) people are," said Cubbison, the county's director for the Marion-Citrus Mental Health Center.

It's not that the county ignores the problem, she said, but it isn't as immediate or visible a concern as it would be in more urban areas. Still, that doesn't mean Citrus is without its share of homeless people, she said.

"There are visual cues everywhere that there's a

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Homeless

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homeless problem," she said.

The survey also asks people what types of services they use or need, such as emergency shelters, rental assistance, medical and dental care, child care and legal help. Those answers will help plug providers into the gaps in county ser-

vices.

They already know one, Cubbison said. Citrus has no transitional housing, a service particularly needed for those who complete Marion-Citrus Mental Health's 90-day substance abuse rehabilitation program. When participants come out of it, they often have no money, no job and nowhere to live, she said.

"If we can get enough people to

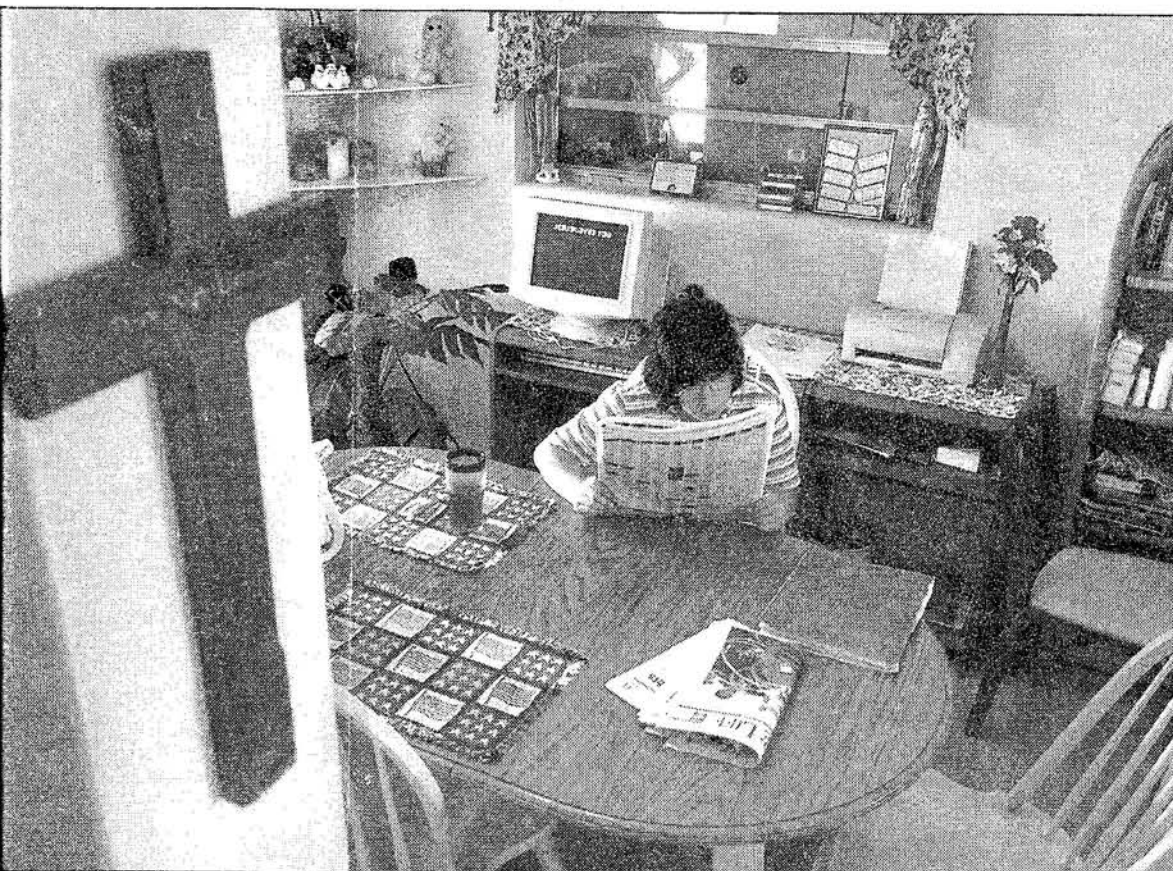
answer (the questions), I think we'll get some good information," she said.

Sipper said he won't be disappointed if the responses are few. He's got 10 beds at The Path, and they are always full.

"I don't need a survey," he said. "I already know what's out there. My phone rings all day long."

— Colleen Jenkins can be reached at 860-7303 or cjenkins@sptimes.com.

s Path can lead to a better life



Carter, 31, scans the help wanteds, part of her daily routine. For about six weeks, she and her daughter Grace have been living at The Path shelter, which she says has been "like a rock" for her.

Times photos — STEPHEN J. CODDINGTON



"is for Hope," says Grace Hensley, 5, playing a game with Wayne Sipper at The Path homeless shelter. To Grace, Hope is her older sister's name, but to Sipper it is what his mission provides.

off of us forever."

Can't find a job because you lack computer skills? The shelter has PCs available for training. No driver's license or a car to get to work? Use one of the shelter's two bicycles in the garage. Still got time on your hands? The house could use a coat of paint. And the vegetable garden (big producers this year: tomatoes and squash) isn't going to feed itself.

The staffers have given lessons in parenting, budgeting, even driving. And, woven through it all, the message of God's love and caring. Sometimes, that love has a bit of an edge.

Toss a group of strangers, each battling a host of demons in their lives, into a shelter environment at a time of crisis and you have a recipe for disaster. Some clients form cliques and stake out territory or quarrel with each other. Describing the staff as sort of parents to adults, Sipper explains that they

use counseling, roundtable gripe sessions, even time out to keep the peace. "Never let the sun go down on your anger," he said.

The shelter has strict rules: There are curfews. Use alcohol or drugs and you're out, and there are urine tests and Breathalyzer on hand to settle any disputes. Sipper sometimes uses an old-fashioned detection device. "I work 'em outside. I can smell the alcohol when they sweat."

Cigarettes are not expressly prohibited — yet. But Sipper offers a \$100 bonus to anyone who quits smoking for 90 days. No one has claimed a bonus so far.

Not everyone who arrives at the shelter gets in. There is an extensive interview process because, he said, "We want to help people who are interested in changing their lives."

Sipper knows all of the tricks the clients might try because he was there himself.

Before arriving in Citrus County nearly eight years ago, Sipper, 42, led a troubled life in South Florida. He sold drugs. He was a professional gambler. He drifted among odd jobs, from an electrician and welder to a limo driver. At his lowest point physically and spiritually, he came to Citrus to be with his father. He found God waiting for him.

"If not for Jesus in my life, I

don't know what would have happened," he said.

■ ■ ■

The face of homelessness today is a woman and her children. Divorced or unmarried, fleeing abuse, sometimes with several kids from different fathers, lacking basic skills to find even a minimum-wage job. "They are by far the fastest-growing segment (of the homeless) in America," Sipper said.

Being one of a handful of shelters in the region and one of the very few that accepts women and children, the Path gets referrals from Citrus, Marion, Lake, Hernando and even Pasco counties.

The homeless are all around us, just hidden. "Citrus looks like just a nice, quiet retirement community, but they are here," Sipper said. "It's not like a big city, you don't see it on the streets. This is what's going on all across America. The missions are swamped."

As it happens, this is the start of National Homeless Awareness Week and a newly formed group called the Hunger and Homeless Coalition has a number of events set to draw local attention to the problem.

Teenagers spent a chilly Friday night sleeping in cardboard boxes on the grounds of the First Assembly of God Church in Inverness to get a taste of being homeless. On Tuesday, the church is hosting a forum called Faces of the Homeless where homeless people, shelter directors and government officials will discuss the needs of the estimated 450 people in Citrus who on any given day have no place to live.

Throughout this week, blankets will be collected at churches and businesses around the county for distribution to the homeless through police substations and other sites.

For Sipper and others who others who wrestle with the problem here all year long, from the Citrus County Abuse Shelter Association and the Salvation Army to the operators of the Hayes Motel in Crystal River and local churches and sanctuaries, events such as this week's shed some essential light on the rising tide of homelessness.

But what about next week, and the weeks after that? What happens when Sipper's "tidal wave" finally breaks?

"They'll be sleeping in tents on the front yard," he said, pointing to the vacant lot across from the shelter. "We'll have real soup lines at churches. They're going to come to the food. They're not going away."