

Homeless Count or Are Counted

Workers, many of them street people themselves, fan out across the county to learn the extent of the problem.

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Covered in blankets on the shadowy steps of a Venice church, the two sleeping forms are nearly impossible to see.

Linda Miles and Venita Archer, two volunteers canvassing the streets for homeless people, probe the darkness with a flashlight.

"I think it's a guy and a woman," Miles says finally. "I'm amazed they didn't wake up."

Archer makes two hash marks on a tally sheet and the team continues its search, slowly crisscrossing 30 blocks of streets and alleyways in Miles' Mitsubishi.

In a scene repeated hundreds of times Tuesday night, volunteers and paid workers fanned out across Los Angeles County on the first of an unprecedented three-day count of the homeless that will conclude with counts that start this evening.

In addition to the street canvass, the \$350,000 project will include a count of shelter residents, an in-depth survey of 3,300 homeless people and a telephone survey of households.

The results, expected in June, will be used when local homeless programs apply for federal funds.

Numerous other cities and counties around the nation this week, including Orange and Riverside counties, are conducting similar counts after the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development demanded more accurate assessments of the homeless problem. The department this week awarded about \$1.4 billion in homeless funds, including \$228 million for California.

Organizers in Los Angeles County reported few glitches: Overflow crowds of homeless people who hoped to pick up a few bucks for walking familiar streets were turned away from one Westside center; one count in an Antelope Valley census tract was scrapped after canvassers found the mountainous road washed out; and Burbank police reportedly

blocked a team of volunteers.

But overall, the first day was pronounced a success.

"I think it really went much smoother than we expected," said Mitchell Netburn, executive director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the city-county agency coordinating the count. "I'm just really pleased with the overwhelmingly enthusiastic and committed response from homeless providers and the homeless themselves. I don't think anybody took it cavalierly or approached it as 'Let me make some marks and pick up my money.' "

An estimated 1,200 enumerators packed 20 training sessions last week. Two-member teams will canvass 500 census tracts in the county. Enumerators were paid \$10 an hour.

Although many canvassers were on foot, many others used their own vehicles, and homeless services authorities rented extra vans. But one large census tract in Pacoima was abandoned because teams didn't have transportation. Officials said the area would be folded into San Gabriel Valley counts scheduled for Wednesday.

The Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count began in the Antelope Valley, where about 60 people surveyed Lancaster and Palmdale.

Early morning was chosen because it is easier to locate homeless encampments in the daylight in the rugged rural terrain, officials said.

One Antelope Valley census tract included 520 road miles and was covered by four teams. Many of the homeless who helped were familiar with the area, though, and came back with good data, said Peter Connery, vice president of Applied Survey Research, which is helping to conduct the count and will assess results.

Final numbers for the street count are expected in a few weeks.

Homeless authorities bought hundreds of parkas to hand out in case of rain, but Tuesday night the weather held up. Nevertheless, the threat of wet weather probably drove some homeless people into hiding places, Connery said.

There were also murmurs at one of the deployment sites, the Ken Edwards Center on 4th Street in Santa Monica, that police had roused the homeless in the days before the census.

Giselle Matus, a Los Angeles County employee who volunteered to count and enlisted her brother, Eric, surveyed Santa Monica near the beach and said she was surprised to have encountered only a dozen homeless people, at most.

She said they questioned residents and were told many homeless had migrated to freeway underpasses.

The two, who drove around to do their count, also said they were pulled over twice by

Santa Monica police officers for no apparent reason.

"I guess they were bored," said Matus. "We explained what we were doing and they were fine."

Santa Monica police spokesman Lt. Frank Fabrega said he was unaware of any incidents connected with the homeless count and insisted that police conducted no sweeps.

Burbank police confirmed that they are investigating an incident in which a team of canvassers said it was stopped by a police officer, told there were no homeless people in the city and asked to leave.

"Some people were stopped either just inside or very near the Burbank border, and we're trying to determine if Burbank officers were involved," said Sgt. Jay Jette. "Ample notice was given to watch commanders about the census and they were told to assist the agency in any way they could. If it did involve a Burbank officer, we'd like to make things right."

On the Westside, Ralph Lester and Malcolm Drayton strode the Venice boardwalk and drove with their team captain, Eddie Banda, to scour the quaint canals that reflect the surrounding multimillion-dollar homes.

In previous months, Banda, an outreach worker with the St. Joseph Center homeless agency, said he had encountered an encampment of six people.

But Tuesday night, the damp ground covered with scratchy underbrush yielded no people, just an abandoned blanket. The three had more success along Washington Boulevard, where they counted dozens of parked vans and trailers that appeared to be inhabited.

Banda knew that many of the vehicles were occupied by homeless people, and the teams were trained to look for cars and RVs with electrical and water connections.

For Miles, the volunteer who searched the heart of Venice, including some of its meaner streets, the route was something of a homecoming.

She was homeless for nearly a dozen years, surviving on the same blocks.

When she and Archer encountered a homeless woman and a companion curled in a blanket on a sidewalk opposite Gold's Gym, she was moved to offer the woman a few dollars.

"She makes me think of how I used to walk up and down these streets and alleys," said Miles, who wants to open a shelter for women and children. "It's a crazy life."