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Homeless tally helps determine amount of aid area receives

The Rev. Rick Stoker peered under the North Fourth Street bridge Wednesday morning looking for homeless people. I peered in behind him. When we didn't see anyone, Rev. Stoker walked confidently into the dark space by the rail bed to check for people hiding in the recesses.

No one was there, but we found a Bible on a ledge. A syringe lay in the dirt nearby.

Rev. Stoker of First Fruit Ministries serves people who live on the streets. Each evening he drives a truck route feeding the needy from Leland to Wilmington's Northside. He knows city streets and byways most of us have never seen.

We were seeking people who might otherwise be missed in the point-in-time homeless survey.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires the annual count by agencies who receive federal funds to serve the homeless. For 24 hours starting at 7 a.m. Wednesday, agency workers in New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender counties counted clients, trying to avoid counting anyone twice.

We cruised streets, visited warm little corner groceries and bumped across wooded lots in his pickup truck.

We stopped downtown to chat with a couple of men. One of them asked for \$3.50 for denture adhesive. Rev. Stoker said he'd bring the product by later. He put two more marks on the tally sheet as we pulled away.

By noon, he had counted 51 people including 11 in tents, one sleeping in a truck and one who stayed on a porch.

This is Rev. Stoker's flock. "I can tell you everybody's name on this board," he said, holding the sheet.

The count doesn't directly determine how many dollars will flow into the area, said the Rev. Rebecca Dixon of Volunteers of America, co-chairwoman of the committee that prepares HUD Continuum of Care grant applications. This year, the committee did its work well.

HUD announced Tuesday that our three-county area will receive \$731,891, just \$3,108 less than requested. The money will be split among six agencies.

The Tri-County Homeless Interagency Council has refined its methods to make the count more accurate. But it's inevitable that some people will be missed and others will be counted twice as they move around during the day.

HUD is working on a better way to track homeless people. It's a database called the Homeless Information Management System.

Last month, the local group working on the project got an update from Hunter Thompson, who in November left his post with the University of North Carolina at Wilmington to become lead coordinator for the Carolina Homeless Information Network.

Every agency that receives HUD money for the homeless must participate. Agencies must pay a license fee for the software, and they'll need to start recording information about clients and entering it into a computer.

They can tailor the software for their own needs, providing them with data to track their results.

Donors and foundations like to see evidence that a program makes a difference.

The amount of information they share with other agencies will vary. Domestic Violence Shelter and Services is wary of doing anything that could help abusers find victims who have sought shelter, so

it may share less than other agencies will.

Goals are to tally demographic data, find reasons people are homeless and see which services are needed but not available.

State officials decided on a statewide approach rather than numerous smaller, regional efforts. Mr. Thompson is putting together a coalition broken into three regions: East, Piedmont and West. By the end of this year, he expects to have 395 agencies signed up, including 82 in the eastern region. Results of Wednesday's count will be reported in a few days. Perhaps someday the count will be replaced by a more accurate and revealing database.

But even that sophisticated database will likely miss some of the folks living under the bridges and out in tents.

Contact Si Cantwell at 343-2364 or si.cantwell@starnewsonline.com

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