

## Volunteers reach out to help Marin homeless

Rob Rogers

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Until a few days ago, Chantel Griggs had a home in Sonoma.

After an accident forced her out, however, the soft-spoken young woman sought shelter at the San Rafael Armory. That's where she found out about the free services provided by Project Homeless Connect as part of Thursday's biennial Marin County homeless survey.

"It's been hectic," said Griggs, a waitress who is between jobs. "But this is a good place, with a lot of resources. I'm hoping to find housing, and I'm looking for a job."

In the past, the county's homeless survey has sent volunteers under bridges, on top of levees and into the woods to identify Marin's homeless residents.

This year, however, agencies and advocates invited homeless residents to come to them at events like Project Homeless Connect's four-hour gathering at the First Presbyterian Church in San Rafael. Throughout the day, volunteers helped visitors register for Social Security or driver's licenses, provided screenings by doctors and dentists, offered legal aid and employment counseling and even gave haircuts.

Homeless advocates say they're seeing a growing number of people living in cars, in tents and on the streets, driven by the faltering economy. A 2007 survey by the Marin Continuum of Housing and Services found at least 1,236 homeless people living in the county, while a 2005 count - which, unlike

the 2007 survey, did not include day laborers - numbered 1,017.

Organizers were compiling homeless numbers gathered from Thursday's survey and did not immediately have a complete tally.

"What's happened with the economy has put more people on the edge," said Supervisor Susan Adams, who said the county's Department of Health and Human Services has seen a 26 percent increase in demand for homeless services during the past year. "Any of us could be in their situation. That's why the community has to come together to solve the problem, which is significant even in Marin County."

Foreclosed homes and a shrinking job market have increased the number of people who are homeless for the first time, and have erased the gains of those who escaped homelessness in the past, said Mary O'Mara, a spokeswoman for Project Homeless Connect, organized by the nonprofit MarinLink.

"We're seeing people who went through similar circumstances in 2004, who became self-sufficient and now are back into the system," O'Mara said.

John London's business failed at the same time that his mother Linda's boyfriend moved out of the home they all shared two years ago. Rent increases - three times in the same year, from \$730 to \$950 - forced the two to leave their San Rafael home and take shelter from Ritter Center.

London, who has spent the past two years caring for his mother and volunteering at the center, is hoping his mother will be able to move into a room at Novato's New Beginnings Center, allowing him to look for a job.

"The Ritter Center has helped us so much," London said. "They've made us feel comfortable."

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While Drew Warner doesn't consider himself homeless - "I've lived in a vehicle for the last five years, which allows me to take a \$10-an-hour job," he said - he appreciated the opportunity to register for Social Security and get a haircut at Thursday's event.

"With everything we've been through this year - a new (presidential) administration, economic instability, and the job market frozen, I'm grateful for this program," Warner said.

Homeless advocates are hoping for a permanent shelter to replace the emergency shelter at the San Rafael Armory, which is scheduled to close for the season Feb. 15. For the moment, however, they'd be happy to receive donations of warm blankets and sleeping bags.

"Sleeping bags are our number one item," said Alissa Ralston, who volunteers at the Armory shelter. "New is better, but clean and used would be fine."

Identifying the county's homeless population can be harder than it seems, Ralston said.

"A lot of homeless people go to a great deal of trouble to not look homeless," said Ralston, watching as another visitor received a haircut. "So people don't realize that the person they pass on the street is homeless. It's scary how many of us are so close to not having anything."

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