

Date: March 4, 2013
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462 Homeless Living Outdoors Interviewed during “Registry Week,” an Intense Effort to Document Fairfax’s Chronically Homeless Men and Women

Fairfax, Va.—More than 200 volunteers spread out across Fairfax County on February 25, 26, and 27, going into the woods and other places where the homeless are living in order to count, photograph, and get names and histories for these individuals. They used smart phones and geo tracking to locate homeless men and women, resulting in more than 462 interviews during the County’s first ever “Registry Week,” a component of the 100,000 Homes Fairfax Campaign.

Over the three days, volunteers from FACETS, Fairfax County Office to Prevent and End Homelessness, New Hope Housing, Pathway Homes, Reston Interfaith, and Volunteers of America Chesapeake, faith communities and businesses surveyed homeless people living in encampments throughout the county. The findings will be used to create profiles of people to ensure that each homeless individual is counted and that their progress in finding housing and services can be better tracked.

Key findings from Registry Week—which were released during a community debrief at Jubilee Christian Center attended by the partners, Congressman Gerry Connolly, Fairfax Board of Supervisors Chairman Sharon Bulova, and a number of other members of the Board of Supervisors—include:

- Nearly a quarter were between 18-34 years old
- The largest number of interviewees (151) were found in the Route 1 corridor
- More than three-quarters of interviewees were male
- “Unable to pay rent/utilities” and “job loss” were by far the most cited reasons for homelessness
- 10 percent were veterans
- Nearly half were employed
- 40 percent had a physical disability

An important part of the interview process was putting a face on homelessness. Here are some reflections from some of the partners about the people and process:

- The theme for the week for me was persistence. As volunteers went deep into the woods persistently trying to find a camp site or went back after two days of refusal to be interviewed, finally connecting with our neighbors who are homeless who were willing to share their story. And most importantly the persistence of the men and women we met living in their cars or on the street. In the worst conditions they continued to smile and seemed hopeful this caring community would help find them a home. Some of them

were gone to work before we got there or were on their way back to the woods from an overnight shift. – Amanda Andere, Executive Director FACETS

- I was struck by the differences in talking with someone in their “home” – in their space versus when we are in shelter and other settings where we must set the rules. Survey teams and clients were respectful of one another. There was a sense of pride from those homeless interviewed when they showed volunteers their campsites. – Kerrie Wilson, CEO, Reston Interfaith
- We learned that chronic homelessness comes in many forms for many reasons and each story is unique and each solution is unique but that all solutions require stable affordable housing and supports and people who care. – Pam Michell, Executive Director, New Hope Housing
- After giving my gloves to a man who immediately placed them on his hands for warmth, I realized that this is home and his struggle every day. The importance of outreach, housing opportunities, support and services from all sectors of our community was never more apparent to me as this week during our Registry Week and 100K Homes Fairfax Campaign when we met with those who have been homeless and living outside—often times for many years—in the cold weather and damp conditions. – Dean Klein, Director, Office to Prevent and End Homelessness

Anecdotes and impressions from volunteers also help shape the findings. Here are some of their comments:

- I didn't realize how self-sufficient some of the campsites were.
- I felt like taking off my boots and coat and giving it to the woman I was interviewing.
- The experience has made me realize that none of us have anything to ever complain about.
- I was amazed at how welcoming those we visited were, how willing they were to share their stories, and how appreciative they were for a cup of coffee, a sandwich, and a \$5 gift card.
- If only we could help everyone understand that the men and women who are homeless are first and foremost human beings who need what we all need – a place to call home and someone to care.
- I believe all of the volunteers walked away with a new perspective on our homeless population and a new found respect for their ability to survive with so little.

Fairfax County had over the past year nearly 2,900 homeless—of which about 300 are chronically homeless. Supporting the county’s 10 year plan to end homelessness, the Campaign is focused on building efficient local systems that target resources to the most vulnerable individuals quickly and predictably. By using the Campaign’s tools and metrics, the county’s partners anticipate getting half of the most vulnerable, chronically homeless in supportive housing in three years—which will save money and possibly lives.