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More help is needed to solve problem of homelessness

By Tina Firesheets

Staff Writer

The bright lights of the Salvation Army's disaster van draw the street people out of the shadows.

The NightWatch volunteers distribute food, hygiene kits and Bibles every Friday night. They also offer words of comfort.

"God loves you."

"Do you have a place to stay?"

"I'm glad we met."

The night begins at the intersection of West Lee and Eugene streets. As the evening progresses, their outreach will venture off the streets and into the woods and under bridges — darkened areas where most people don't go — to find those most in need.

"It's amazing how life can carry you — good people — to circumstances most people would never understand," says Richard Thorpe, a High Point landscaper who volunteers with NightWatch.

About 500 homeless people live in Greensboro. They sleep under bridges, in abandoned cars and buildings and in the woods. The city of Greensboro allocated about \$600,000 this year for services to aid them. That money goes toward the city's homeless shelters and emergency assistance. Also, about \$1 million is spent annually to develop new homes for low-income families.

Homeless advocate Michele Forrest believes that if every church in Greensboro took just one homeless person under its wing, as Jeff Phillips has, that could go a long way toward getting people off the streets.

And though Pete Dudley and Ricky Platt name him as the key player in getting them out from under the bridge, Phillips is uncomfortable with taking all of the credit.

"I'm just a kind of normal — maybe — person, a business owner who loves God," he says. "I just have a passion to want to serve him, not just by going to church on Sunday."

Steve Still, who coordinates NightWatch for the Salvation Army, wishes more churches would follow that example.

"We've got a church on every block, and we've got people sleeping behind them in the bushes because they can't go anywhere else," Still says.

If city leaders want to eradicate homelessness in a decade, they need to understand it's going to take involvement from the entire community, Still says. But it will take time and will require patience and empathy from those assisting.

Forrest says it may take someone as long as five years — or longer — to successfully gain independence and stability.

"It's a long process, and that's OK," she says. "It took them a long time (to become homeless), and it was a series of events that led them there."

Forrest says the problems that lead people to homelessness must be addressed. If they need counseling or help overcoming drug and alcohol addictions, those support systems must be in place for them to move forward, she says.

Some people aren't able to achieve complete independence. Forrest says that's OK, too.

"You go for the highest level of independence," she says. "Then you continue to assist in whatever they need."

But it isn't easy. Some homeless people are distrustful of those trying to help them, Still says.

"A lot of (homeless) people are very leery of even a church reaching out to help because there are all these rules, guidelines and regulations," Still says. "Instead of being embarrassed, falling or failing, they'd rather stay where they're at."

Still, himself a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, acknowledges that rules and guidelines are necessary because he was once homeless himself. And he knows what it takes to overcome that lifestyle.

His life changed successfully nearly 20 years ago because those helping him supported him even when he failed.

But some programs don't benefit what Still calls "the hard-core homeless," such as Dudley and Platt.

For example, a program such as the Salvation Army's Center of Hope, which provides people with emergency or transitional housing, might have failed Dudley and Platt, Still says. At the Center of Hope, the two men would have had a curfew and would have been required to account for everything they did, including work.

"They've been under a bridge for four years. ... They would have innocently broken the rules," Still says.

The kind of support they've received from Phillips and MOVE is probably the best fit for them, Still says.

MOVE has "armed Pete and Ricky with every tool you could hope for to make it," Still says. "I don't have any doubt that they will make it."

Dudley wants to do all he can to keep from returning to that bridge.

"I'm given another chance, and I'm trying to live a little better," he says. "I've got too much I want to do."

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