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Task force aims to end chronic homelessness

By Sanhita Sen

Staff Writer

Eugene Cole sleeps on the back porch of a condemned house. During the five or six years that he's been homeless, the 44-year-old has learned how to survive on the streets.

"You need to be alert," he said. "You need all your wits about you."

So, he skips his medication for chronic kidney disease, which makes him drowsy, even though he'll need two surgeries for his ailment this fall.

He also hides his few possessions in the bushes, so no one steals them, and bathes in the sinks of public libraries.

Cole is among the 13 percent of Guilford County's homeless population that is chronically homeless as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"There's a lot of good people out here that want to go to work and want a place to live," Cole said.

With this in mind, a task force in Guilford County aims to end chronic homelessness over the next 10 years.

The group plans to record and analyze data, help homeless people find jobs and housing, and prevent at-risk groups, such as people recently discharged from prison, hospitals or mental institutions, from becoming homeless.

"It's less expensive to treat people under this (plan) than what we're currently spending," said Neil Belenky, president of the Greensboro United Way. The agency is helping the Guilford County/High Point/Greensboro Task Force on Ending Homelessness.

Belenky pointed to a study conducted in Asheville that followed 19 homeless people who had been arrested a total of 800 times over two years. The cost to taxpayers -- combining police work, jail time and hospital bills -- totaled about \$1,200 per person per month or more than half a million dollars over two years. That amount did not include substance abuse or mental health treatment.

"For that much money, you can do something different," such as provide permanent housing with wrap-around services tailored to the individual's needs, said Martha Are, the homeless policy specialist for North Carolina.

"You can spend what you're already spending and frequently less and get a much better outcome not only for that individual but for the community as a whole."

The Homeless Prevention Coalition estimates there are 734 homeless people in Guilford County, based on its first summer count conducted on July 26.

Though the number is lower than January's count of 1,108, it doesn't necessarily reflect an overall reduction in homelessness. The homeless tend to gather in camps over the winter and are easier to count, said Nancy Hunter, a private consultant who has more than a decade of experience with homelessness issues.

They also may be able to afford housing during the summer because of seasonal jobs like landscaping or construction.

County commissioners Chairwoman Carolyn Coleman said officials are committed to supporting the task force. She, along with the mayors of Greensboro and High Point, appointed the members.

"We'll do anything we can to meet whatever recommendations they make," Coleman said.

To fund the task force's \$30,000 planning phase, the city of Greensboro has provided \$15,000, High Point \$5,700, and the Weaver and Community Foundations the rest.

No money has yet been allotted for carrying out the group's recommendations.

In the meantime, homeless people like Cole or Henrietta Pegues, a 41-year-old with diabetes and three children, are waiting for their lives to get better.

It's tough to get a job "when you look dirty and nasty and are carrying bags," Pegues said. But "one day, I'll get an income and I won't have to worry about all this."

Contact Sanhita Sen at 373-7070 or orssen@news-record.com