

Mountain View VOICE

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MICHELLE LE

Deborah Mann and Jerry Marsh stand outside the camper trailer where they live with no water or electricity. The couple has been homeless in Mountain View and neighboring areas for more than nine years. Marsh, an out-of-work mechanic, says, "If it weren't for food stamps I'd be out of luck. People can't relate."

Homeless count's numbers are mixed, mostly bad

SURVEY SHOWS HOMELESSNESS WAY UP IN LOS ALTOS, DOWN IN MOUNTAIN VIEW

By Daniel DeBolt

A recent homelessness survey commissioned by Santa Clara County presented homeless advocates with some slightly good news, some very bad news, and a mystery.

Among other things, the survey shows that homelessness dipped slightly county-wide over the past two years, rose dramatically in Los Altos, and dropped just as dramatically in Mountain View. It also indicates a disturbing trend: Chronic homelessness in the county has risen significantly since 2007.

According to the survey, the number of people who have been homeless for "many or long episodes" and have a disabling condition — meeting the criteria

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"The numbers are troubling because the chronic homeless are more difficult to get into stable housing," said Don Gage, a county supervisor and co-chair of "Destination: Home," a group working to end homelessness in the county. The final report (available at www.sccgov.org under "Hot Items") does not explain how or why chronic homelessness went up in the county.

Meanwhile, the survey also found that the number of homeless people in Mountain View dropped from 122 to 76

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in the same two-year period. Similarly, the numbers dropped from 237 to 178 in Palo Alto and from 640 to 349 in Sunnyvale.

But in Los Altos, according to the survey, the numbers jumped from 10 people in 2007 to 97 this year.

The survey, made once every two years, is taken by Applied Survey Research, which uses trained volunteers to make the count during two early mornings in the last week of January. Homeless people familiar with an area accompany volunteers to help them identify the homeless and where they might be living.

Los Altos 'anomaly'

The reported shift in the homeless population to Los Altos, a much smaller and more upscale city, has perplexed some homeless advocates, who say there must be something amiss in the survey.

At a City Council meeting last month, Duncan McVicar, a board member of the North County Homeless Housing Coalition — which wants to build transitional housing for the chronically homeless in Mountain View — wondered whether there was an “inaccuracy” or “anomaly” in the numbers.

“They must have counted a lot of people in San Antonio shopping center as being in Los Altos,” McVicar said.

Peter Connery, vice president of Applied Survey Research, has been conducting these counts since the 1990s, and said his firm stands behind the numbers.

“I don’t think there’s any ambiguity on the boundaries,” Connery said. “We have a lot of experience doing this.”

Connery said there could be other reasons why the numbers shifted.

“Potentially there was some migration from people being pushed away from other locations” into Los Altos, he said. Sometimes, for example, police and rail authorities can push homeless encampments out of a city, he said. (In order to protect the Los Altos homeless from being displaced, Connery would not disclose exactly where they were living.)

Another factor could be how the count was conducted, Connery said.

“Some of the change could have been from the fact that we had better people that had more knowledge in 2009,” he said. “There is certainly some observational ability that can attribute to it.”

He also noted that in Los Altos there “tends to be more open space. There are a lot of more hidden areas where folks are not as easily seen.”



MICHELLE LE

Deborah Mann and Jerry Marsh inside the camper trailer where they live with no water or electricity.

According to Community Services Agency director Tom Myers, the agency has been providing help for an increasing number of homeless people from Mountain View and surrounding cities. Myers said CSA has served 350 homeless people so far this year at its Stierlin Road office, though he added that many of them are temporarily housed, which means they might not have shown up on the survey. ▣

■ BY THE NUMBERS :

HOMELESS COUNTS COUNTYWIDE AND BY CITY:

Santa Clara County: 7,086 (down from 7,202 in 2007)

Mountain View: 76 (down from 122 in 2007)

Los Altos: 97 (up from 10 in 2007)

Los Altos Hills: 0 (was 0 in 2007)

Palo Alto: 178 (down from 237 in 2007)

Sunnyvale: 349 (down from 640 in 2007)

SELECTED RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF 938 HOMELESS PEOPLE:

19.3 percent had been turned away from a homeless shelter

2 percent had been turned away from transitional housing

2.6 percent had been turned away from both a shelter and housing

76 percent had not tried to get into a shelter or housing

OTHER KEY FINDINGS:

In 2009, 36 percent of the county's homeless population is chronically homeless (up from 26 percent in 2007)

68 percent of the homeless population is male, 30 percent female, 2 percent transgender

33 percent is Caucasian, 33 percent Latino, 20 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian

79 percent were living in Santa Clara County when they became homeless

67 percent had one or more disabling conditions

47 percent claimed to have at least one mental health issue

14 percent were homeless veterans

Homeless persons with substance abuse issues rose to 41 percent (up from 30 percent in 2007); 21 percent cited substance abuse as the primary cause of their homelessness

(Source: 2009 Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey Report)

■ INFORMATION

To help the North County Homeless Housing Coalition, contact Julie Barton at (650) 961-8806, Gisela Daetz at (408) 738-4726, Duncan McVicar at (650) 962-8053 or Sue Shaffer (650) 967-0558. To help the Community Services Agency, visit www.csacares.org. For more on Destination: Home, visit www.destinationhome.ning.com.