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## Gwinnett counts its homeless

### Homeless tally will determine HUD funding

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About 70 volunteers fanned out across Gwinnett County before dawn today, looking for homeless people to count.



Kimberly Smith / AJC

Volunteer worker Carla Myers (right) interviews Tiabusa Espinosa (left) and Joaquin Jose (center) as volunteers from various homeless aid agencies in Gwinnett fan out to count and collect data on homeless persons.

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The multi-county effort was launched at the behest of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development officials, who plan to use local homelessness figures to allocate federal housing assistance.

Organizers hope to use the data collected to bolster their case to build emergency shelters for homeless women and children in Gwinnett, said Ellen Gerstein, executive director of the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services.

Search teams from churches and social service organizations met at 5 a.m. today to begin the search. They concluded around 9 a.m.

Local organizers stressed to the volunteers before the search that their mission was to collect data, not to provide outreach. At least, not this time, said Elizabeth Runkle of the nonprofit group Pathways.

Organizers went to lengths to keep from scaring off homeless people. Search teams padded through back lots and woody breaks without police escorts. Homeless people tend to scatter when they see police, and officers are obligated to arrest someone whom they observe breaking the law, Runkle said.

"Keep your body language neutral," she told volunteers at a 6 a.m. briefing before the search. "If someone tells you something shocking, don't let the person know that."

Still, many people were wary of giving even their initials to the homeless census takers. As a group of volunteers approached a group of Latino men ostensibly waiting for day labor in front of a Norcross grocery store, about a third left when asked to take the survey, said David Casas, a volunteer from the Impact Housing Group nonprofit.

Many of the men said they were living four, five and six to an apartment in local complexes. Most of the day laborers counted as "precariously housed" as a result.

Volunteer teams searched in areas known to police as squatting spots, many just out of sight from major roads and businesses.

In one case, search teams spoke to a man who emerged from beneath a blue and green plastic tarp in the woods. The sheeting had been strung between two trees, just out of sight of an office park next to Indian Trail Road near I-85.

"I've got a job, but the money I make isn't enough to pay the rent," said Tee June, 44, a cook who said he had been living in the makeshift shelter for two weeks. A cardboard lean-to lay a few yards away.

"There are maybe one or two people out here at night," he said. "I'm a survivor. That's just me. I'm a grown man. I keep my own."