

Volunteers help save a life during homeless count

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A team of volunteers from LifeStyles of Maryland helped save a life last Wednesday evening while they were out conducting a head count of the county's homeless residents.

The volunteers were participating in the one-day nationwide census called the Point-in-Time Homeless Survey when they came across a young man lying unconscious on a table in the SuperSuds Laundromat on Drury Drive in La Plata.

"I asked [one of the volunteers] to shake the young man to wake him up to see if he needed anything," Waldorf resident Dyotha Sweat told the Maryland Independent. "But there was no life. This young man did nothing."

A Charles County Sheriff's Office deputy accompanying the crew then called for emergency medical assistance, and Sweat and her team stayed with the young man until they arrived. La Plata Police Department officers also responded to the call.

"They gave him two shots [of naloxone, which is used to treat opioid overdoses] and they had to give him oxygen to make sure the shots would take," said Sweat, a retired Navy chief petty officer and president of the Charles County NAACP. "That's how far gone he was."

"We saved that young man's life because he was dying on that table when we walked in that room," said Sweat. "The EMTs told us ... that he would not have made it if we hadn't ... gotten him the medical assistance that he needed."

The LPPD officers took the man into custody because he was uncooperative with the EMTs and the officers. Chief Carl Schinner told the Maryland Independent that the overdose was the result of alcohol consumption rather than drugs.

“It kind of puts it in perspective why this is important and why we do this every year,” Sweat said in a video posted on LifeStyles’ Facebook page following the team’s return later that evening.

Sweat and her team were among dozens of volunteers of all ages who fanned out across Charles County to try to get an accurate “snapshot” of the number of sheltered and unsheltered adults, children and veterans in the country that day. Federal and state agencies use those data to determine the resources that they will provide to homeless programs and services in the county.

LifeStyles’ Executive Director Sandy Washington said that this year 121 volunteers participated in the survey, which took place from noon to midnight. Many worked at LifeStyles’ office packing supplies and loading them into cars and vans; others teamed up to head into the field to conduct the surveys. Each survey team covered a particular area during a four-hour shift.

Volunteers conducting surveys usually work in groups of four or more, and especially during the evening they are usually accompanied by CCSO deputies in plainclothes to ensure their safety. This year, 10 CCSO deputies volunteered to serve on the survey teams.

Washington said that 136 homeless individuals were reached during the 12-hour survey. The count needs to be tallied against LifeStyles’ records to weed out duplicates, but Washington said that the initial numbers suggest that there were fewer homeless people counted during the survey compared with last year.

Washington explained that LifeStyles has a window of ten days during which it can still count people provided they were homeless on the night of the survey.

Throughout the 12-hour survey, the volunteer teams traveled into the woods to visit tent encampments, visited restaurants, hotels and convenience stores where many unemployed homeless spend their daylight hours, and scoured shopping center parking lots to speak to people living in cars.

In addition to taking down general information about a person such as their age, disabilities and veteran status, volunteers also offered supplies such as blankets, food, toiletries and food and gas coupons. Despite the recent heavy rains and waves of cold temperatures, several survey respondents declined to take supplies, saying they were well equipped for the season.

Even so, the demand for homeless services in Charles County has been on the increase this year. The SafeNights shelter program, which LifeStyles runs, has been running over capacity this winter and has had to open an additional shelter site, something it has not had to do in the program's 13-year history.

To better serve homeless residents in need, LifeStyles relies on personal relationships that it develops with the people it serves and through information shared by homeless residents, who discreetly keep an eye out for each other throughout the changing seasons.

Responding to the concerns of LifeStyles' assistant director Corae Young, a homeless resident living in his truck said that he had fallen "a little behind" in his doctor visits because his support network had collapsed.

"I'm lucky that I can usually hustle a couple of rides, but I can't afford to buy gas," he said, and where his truck was parked was too far to walk to LifeStyles.

The man declined Young's offer of a blanket, saying, "People think the winters are bad, but I can get by."

He said that he is even able to pick up Wi-Fi signals from a nearby free hotspot.

“It’s not stable, but I’m a bit of a geek,” he said.

Washington said that first-time volunteers often become regulars because the experience of meeting and talking with homeless residents deeply affects them.

“What’s inspiring is when people who have never done this before come back [from the field] and talk about what the experience meant to them,” Washington said. “The things they were able to share are priceless, and those things are a catalyst to help them recognize they need to do more to help others.”

“Every year, I hear people saying, ‘I can’t believe this is happening in our county,’” Washington said. “It enables them to share with their circles that there are these needs, and that they have to go out into the community and do something about it.”

Lloyd Jansen, branch manager of the La Plata branch of the Charles County Public Library, said he volunteered to participate on a survey crew this year as a way to get to know more about a part of the community that his library serves.

“I thought it would be a good way to see a part of Charles County that we don’t much get to see, and also interact with people who may not be aware of our resources at our library,” Jansen said.

Jansen said that homeless residents are welcome to take advantage of the library’s public computers for creating a resume or looking for and applying for jobs, as well as to shelter from extreme weather.

Washington said that the Point in Time survey offers another benefit that may be less tangible, but is no less important for the county’s homeless residents.

“It’s important to tell people, ‘You are not alone, people care about you,’” Washington said. “We are able to tell them, ‘You can come to us, we’re here to help.’”