

Jan. 30 census will reveal state of homelessness

By Angela Carter
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NEW HAVEN — When Kelly Meeker-Walters and her son, Dale, 8, crossed the New Haven Green last October, it was the first time he saw homeless people.

The sight inspired him to collect blankets for the homeless. But the mother and son had no way of knowing at the time that they would soon join the ranks of the city's homeless.

"Never in a million years did I think we were going to be in that situation. We brought the blankets here with us and he donated them to the shelter," Meeker-Walters said during an interview at the Women in Crisis Shelter, run by New Haven Home Recovery.

"Home is where the heart is. He said to me: 'Mommy, we're not homeless. We're just houseless,'" Meeker-Walters said.

They have been at the shelter since Dec. 29, when Meeker-Walters' former roommate moved to a new apartment. Without enough income for a place of her own, she called the shelter, searching for a bed.

She and Dale will be in the city's tally for the 2007 "Point-in-Time" homeless count. For the first time, hundreds of volunteers will canvass Connecticut cities and towns Tuesday to survey the homeless on streets, abandoned buildings, wooded areas and other places they may be known to dwell.

Simultaneously, information will be gathered from those living in shelters.

Most communities will conduct the count from 7 to 9 p.m., in an effort to eliminate duplication, while also collecting information on how people became homeless and what they need to get back on their feet.

Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, Corporation for Supportive Housing and the Reaching Home campaign are coordinating the statewide count. In New Haven, New Haven Continuum of Care, a coalition of nonprofit agencies and state departments that provide services to the homeless, is organizing the count.

Walter Tuminski, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, said the homeless need a resource center where they can get a hot meal, take a shower and connect with services under one roof. He used to live near a highway overpass off State Street. "We would wash outside at a water spigot and then we air-dried. We shaved at the train station," he said.

Tuminski now lives at Safe Haven, run by Liberty Community Services. "What you really want is to get clean and stop smelling like a skunk," he said.

James G. Farrales, vice president of program development and quality for Continuum of Care Inc., said the data gathered will help retain federal funding for homeless assistance programs. Continuum of Care provides supportive housing to people with mental illness and developmental disabilities and is part of the local coalition.

In the January 2006 New Haven count, there were 548 adults and children in emergency shelters, 310 in transitional shelters and 319 who were unsheltered.

According to the city's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness, families are a growing percentage of the homeless population here.

Meeker-Walters said more resources are needed for low-income families like hers, that do not meet criteria including mental illness, being in addiction recovery, probation



Melanie Stengel/Register

Walter Tuminski, top, Kelly Meeker-Walters and her son, Dale Walters Jr., share a hug. Meeker-Walters and her son are staying at New Haven Recovery-Women in Crisis Shelter. Tuminski is staying at Safe Haven. They came together to discuss homelessness and the upcoming census.

status or involvement with the state Department of Children and Families. "We're just a displaced family," she said.

For more information on the homeless count or to volunteer, send an e-mail message to Farrales at ffarrales@continuumct.com.