



**Melisa Conrad, emergency social service worker with the Joplin Salvation Army, conducts an interview with a homeless person who was inside a tent Wednesday during the homeless count in Joplin.**

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# YEARLY COUNT



**Carol Gibson (right), an intern from Missouri Southern State University, conducts an interview during Wednesday's homeless count in Joplin. Gibson, who said she experienced homelessness herself several years ago, is studying to become a social worker.**

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Homeless census gives area providers clearer picture of problem

**BY KIMBERLY BARKER**  
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**G**ary Hedge braced against the snowy, 20-degree weather Wednesday morning in Joplin while wearing several layers of clothing and hunkered inside five sleeping bags.

The 60-year-old, who's been homeless for the past six years, said many people are "just one

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paycheck away from being in this position," holding open the door to his tent.

Hedges was included in the annual point-in-time count this week as participating agencies record how many people are experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. It will be done again in the summer. The focus was on Joplin, Webb City, Carthage and Cartersville.

The count is conducted annually by the Homeless Coalition of Jasper and Newton Counties to provide a better picture of how many people are experiencing homelessness in the region. It gives local shelters and transitional housing providers accurate contact information and also allows them the opportunity to connect people with information and referrals.

"For the size of our area, we have a lot of homeless services — Souls Harbor, Watered Gardens, Washington Family Hope Center, the Carthage Crisis Center — and I think it draws more homeless folks here," said Robin Smith, assistant community development director with the Economic Security Corp. who also chairs the homeless coalition. "I think it's a bigger problem than people realize because a majority of homeless folks are pretty hidden."

Originally from Los Angeles, Hedges said he worked as a lab manager for 15 years before his employer went under. He went back to college and earned an associate degree in process technology.

In about 2009, Hedges had been hired at a business where he made \$36 an hour, but eventually he was laid off. He used all of his savings flying around the country for job interviews in the same industry. Nothing substantial panned out.

The COVID-19 pandemic only made things worse. He was laid off at a Joplin company. Then his car broke down. Hedges said it was one thing after the other.

Hedges said he doesn't mind working or doing his part to receive assistance services such as that offered by the Watered Gardens Worth Shop, an employment and thrift shop operation for the homeless and poor. Joplin has an abundance of resources for the homeless including the Salvation Army, which offers free showers, laundry, hot meals and emergency food boxes.

"Working, that part's easy," Hedges said. "Normally, I would be working right now, but I lost my job."

He added: "I don't want to end up like this for the rest of my life. In March, I'm going to try to get a job."

The data collected from the count paints a picture of the local homeless community and also helps leverage private, local, state and federal funds for local programs. Results are then reported to the U.S. Depart-



Evelyn Duvall, case manager with the Joplin Salvation Army, looks for a makeshift encampment during Wednesday's homeless count in Joplin. The information gleaned from the count is used by various nonprofit agencies to apply for federal, state and local grants to help provide services to the homeless. GLOBE | ROGER NOMER

## Background

**THE HOMELESS COALITION** of Jasper and Newton Counties was formed in 1989 to develop solutions for homelessness and obtain resources that could be used for the homeless. It is a private, nonprofit organization that receives federal, state and local funding, grants and donations.

ment of Housing and Urban Development.

"Several of our agencies with the homeless coalition are required to give this information out, as far as the numbers we collect here in the area," Smith said. "It helps with funding for different types of programs."

In previous years, the homeless coalition hosted Homeless Connect at Memorial Hall, an event at which recently homeless or low-income people could learn about the coalition's programs, Social Security assistance, health care, employment and mental health education. This year's event was canceled due to the pandemic, and the number of volunteers for the efforts are down.

Smith said the circumstances will have an impact on the numbers.

"We usually survey folks at Homeless Connect as well as going out on the street and doing it," Smith said. "But we can't have it because of COVID-19, and Memorial Hall is unusable at the moment. It's probably going to be a smaller number than what is accurate. There will be areas that won't go out and count because of safety reasons."

## SALVATION ARMY COUNT

The Joplin Salvation Army started on Wednesday its homeless census in which case managers and a student intern go to wooded areas, tent cities, parks, the underside of highway bridges and camps.

Evelyn Duvall, case manager with the Joplin Salvation Army, has been participating in the homeless counts for six years. She helped organize and set up the shower program a few years ago. People can also do laundry at the location by appointment.

Duvall said many homeless people pitch a tent off the beaten path and that the county participants always announce themselves for safety reasons.

"We're trying to find out

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## Robin Smith

Assistant community development director at Economic Security Corp.

what they've been doing for the last year and how long they've been homeless," she said. "We also try to inform them about different services and where to go to get signed up."

Carol Gibson, an intern with the ESC, conducted her first count with the Salvation Army case managers. Gibson is a senior at Missouri Southern State University majoring in social work. She can empathize with many of the people they surveyed.

"I used to be homeless about eight years ago," Gibson said. "It was a year after the Joplin tornado. I stayed in an abandoned trailer, but it had no electricity or running water. To shower, we would put 2-liter bottles outside to heat up during the summer. It took a lot of work to get off the streets, but I stayed with friends eventually. But there were times where I slept in the car."

Duvall said the pandemic has been eating away the Salvation Army's funds, and the organization didn't reach its goal with the bell ringers at Christmas-time. It's seeing an increase in need, which only makes the homeless count even more important, she said.

"We get money from the government, but also the Salvation Army Thrift Store helps pay for a lot of stuff too," she said. "Everyone has their own programs and how they use the money. The Salvation Army keeps 8 cents of every dollar, which goes toward bills, lighting and electricity."