

PUBLISHED in the TUCSON WEEKLY ON FEBRUARY 5, 2009:

Figures on the Streets

Volunteers head out at dawn to count Tucson's homeless

By [MARI HERRERAS](#) 

At 5 a.m., it's dark and rather cold out. But that's not enough to keep Pat DeVito and an estimated 149 other volunteers from driving and walking the streets of Tucson to count the people they see wandering in alleys, sleeping in abandoned lots or city parks, or waking up in cars parked along residential streets--Tucson's homeless.

These activities on the morning of Wednesday, Jan. 28, are part of the 2009 Annual Homeless Street Count, organized by the Tucson Planning Council for the Homeless (TPCH) to collect data that can help guide service planning, and influence state and federal funding.

DeVito, in search of anyone who looks like they could be homeless, is assigned a quadrant south of Ajo Way. I'm in the passenger seat, and we both keep looking from one side of the street to the other.

"What about that person?" DeVito asks, looking at a man walking down a street, visible only in the dim streetlights, his coat snug tight around him, and his large backpack heaped on his shoulders. He goes on the list, along with several others seen walking here and there, at a time when most people are still home snug in their beds.

By 7 a.m., the sun is finally out, and DeVito drives back to a few parks and abandoned lots where people could easily hide in the early-morning dark. If anyone was in these parks and lots, they are long gone.



Mari Herreras

Laurie Mazerbo and Mary Pat Sullivan co-chaired the 2009 Annual Homeless Street Count organized by the Tucson Planning Council for the Homeless.

By 8:30 a.m., most volunteers deliver their reports to the place where they started. For DeVito, that's the office of Mary Pat Sullivan, executive director of Comin' Home, a veterans' transitional-services agency.

Just three hours earlier, Sullivan's office was filled with people looking at maps and getting one last cup of coffee before leaving to count. By 8:30 a.m., it's all about the reports, looking at the numbers and team members getting debriefed.

"Right now, it looks like there is roughly a 10 to 20 percent increase of people counted compared to last year's numbers," Sullivan says, adding that an official report won't be available until mid-February.

Sullivan, who co-chaired the count this year with Laurie Mazerbo, Our Family's Teens in Transition manager, says the count will give agencies and elected officials a better idea of where services are needed, and who needs those services, such as homeless youth.

"It gives us an idea of how many underserved people there are, because actual information is far more reliable than conjecture, which is often based on emotion and attitude," Sullivan says.

The count has taken place for the last 10 years, but the last four years have been particularly important to those who work on homeless-community issues, because the collection methodology has remained the same, which allows agencies to compare apples to apples, Sullivan says.

According to the TCPH Web site, in 2006, the street count ended with 642 homeless. That number grew in 2007 to 1,099 and to 1,108 in 2008.

In 2008, an estimated 3,131 Tucsonans were homeless, up from 2,580 in 2006, according to TPCH; those figures include those living in shelters or transitional housing.

Sullivan says she thinks the homeless-count increase in 2009 is due in part to an increase in volunteers. A group of Peace Corps fellows specifically focused on identifying homeless youth, while the remaining 120 volunteers focused on all homeless in Tucson. The increased effort paid off, showing 29 youth were on Tucson's streets on Jan. 28; only 12 were identified last year.

"I am solely convinced we have far more local homeless and (homeless) youth than most want to admit. We live in a city where 25 percent of the community lives below the poverty level. That puts more people at risk, so that when stuff happens, like the economy, people lose their homes faster," Sullivan says.

Sullivan is happy with the count results, but says she always worries about the volunteers who participate; many of them have never before interacted with homeless people.

"It can have an emotional impact," she says.

DeVito, a longtime Tucson resident, says she wasn't negatively affected by her first-time experience participating in the count. She decided to volunteer after being inspired by President Barack Obama's call to service.

"It seemed like a good thing to do and is something I care about. So, when the president said he wanted us to do service, this is what I decided to do," DeVito says.

"For purposes of planning and policy, it's important to do a count. I think sometimes, there are myths and an inaccurate view of who is out there," DeVito says. "With the current economy and those coming back from the war, it can take a while for people to realize they need help. As a result, I think we're going to see more homeless, and for the first time, I think we're going to see women vets with physical and mental issues in need of services."