

Counting the Valley homeless part of a nationwide effort

By JESSICA WAMBACH

YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

To Mike MacCalla, it makes a big difference how many homeless people are in Yakima.

When four volunteers with Yakima County's Point-in-Time survey arrived at his campsite along the Yakima River on Thursday afternoon, he gratefully accepted a few snacks and hygiene supplies and answered questions about his homelessness.

Today, after three years of using a temporary filling to hold a cap on a bad tooth, 47-year-old MacCalla has a dentist appointment.

"At least something is starting to take place," he said.

About 120 community volunteers helped with Thursday's survey, an annual attempt to count the nation's homeless in one day. The data they collected is vital for organizations like Neighborhood Connections — the free medical and dental clinic for the homeless opened at the clinic at 102 S. Naches Ave. by Yakima Neighborhood Health Services in December — which need hard numbers to secure funding.

Beyond that, Steve Gaulke, a homeless outreach worker at Central Washington Comprehensive Mental Health, says the survey has raised awareness.

"There's more understanding that there is an issue in Yakima and it's going to take the whole community to help solve that," he said.

Volunteers like Eric Alegria and Larry Connell, who trained with the Yakima County Coalition for the Homeless before hitting the streets, want to see that happen. They spent a windy



BRIAN FITZGERALD/Yakima Herald-Republic

Eduardo Ron, left, a homeless man living near the Yakima River, talks with Steve Gaulke, a homeless outreach counselor with Comprehensive Mental Health, during the annual Point-in-Time survey on Thursday.



recovered from a drug addiction. His goal now is to get his GED and get back on his feet.

At a neighboring camp, Gaulke and volunteers Judy and Curtis Greeley of Selah passed out homemade cookies, scarves and hats. Judy knitted with yarn she bought with money she collected for the cause.

"I wrote letters to all my friends and relatives and I've had donations from Montana and all over Washington," she said.

This is only the second year the survey has been taken outside of food banks and shelters. Last year, volunteers counted nearly 1,200 homeless people in the county and survey organizers expect to see a larger number when this year's results are tallied in a few weeks.

"It's amazing, but I think definitely you'll see an increase this year because the winter has been harder and people aren't working as much," said Lupita Gutierrez-Parker, executive director of the Yakima County Coalition for the Homeless.

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