

Local Census - 1990

Homeless people to help count homeless in census

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The U.S. Census Bureau is going to hire homeless people to work on the 1990 census, and not just because it wants to give people who are destitute a break.

The bureau plans to use a cadre of homeless people, homeless activists and shelter providers for "S-Night," — the bureau's first major attempt to count the homeless — on March 20. On S-Night (so dubbed for "Shelter Night"), the workers will go to shelters in their communities, starting at about 8 p.m., to help the homeless there fill out an abbreviated version of the census questionnaire.

Then they will hit the streets for an all-night count of the homeless.

"They'll go to abandoned houses, railroad tracks, trash bins, wherever homeless people are," said Darlene Marquez, of the bureau's San Jose Office. The workers won't awaken those who are sleeping, but will try to get the most basic information such as sex, race and approximate age.

"S-night" will be carried out across the nation in communities that have identified a homeless population.

Sydnei Wilby, who heads the Homeless Persons Health Project for Santa Cruz County, said her project's field workers are trying to get the word out about the importance of the count and about the employment opportunity S-Night represents to their clients. They have helped a number of homeless people fill out the application forms to work on the count.

Wilby said that many of the people her program deals with are "very, very paranoid" about giving information about themselves to a governmental agency. One of the messages program workers have been trying to get

across is that all the information collected by the Census Bureau is confidential and cannot be shared with any other government agency. Just as with the general population, there are a number of people who have indicated they understand the importance of the census and a "certain percentage are not willing to participate."

Marquez said the bureau is undertaking the special count because of increased attention to

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the issue and lobbying by homeless activists who want to determine the extent of the problem with an official count of the nation's homeless.

Homelessness has been on the increase over the last 10 years, Wilby said, and people with children are joining their ranks in increasing numbers. Homelessness is no longer perceived "just as a health problem, but (as) a major social and political problem as well. Homelessness has come to the forefront," she said.

Those who work with the homeless are eager to have a good count, she said.

Census figures are used by a host of governmental and non-governmental organizations to set policy and determine the need for spending on social programs, among other things.

For its planning and funding purposes, the county has based

its estimates of the number of local homeless on a 1985 survey. That year, a count was made of people who came to various social service agencies for help. There were about 10,000 that year, Wilby said, and the estimate is that about a quarter of them could be counted as homeless.

Wilby is glad the bureau has decided to do the special count, but, she said, the number of people who show up at shelters can vary greatly from night to night. If it's a warm night, the homeless could be undercounted, she said.

The bureau wants to have the homeless count themselves not only because they have inside information on where to go, but because they'll have "more sensitivity about how to approach the homeless. We don't want to offend anybody," in trying to collect information, Marquez said.

Likewise, the bureau is looking for bilingual English-Spanish speakers and members of ethnic minority groups to help with the census in non-English speaking and minority communities. Workers do not need to be U.S. citizens to work for the Census Bureau.

Many of the jobs last a month or more and the pay scale begins at \$7 an hour, she said. The S-night workers will be paid about \$7.50 an hour. To qualify, applicants have to take a 25-question comprehension exam, and answer at least 10 of the questions correctly. The test is in English.

In all, about 400 workers are needed in the tri-county (Santa Cruz-Monterey-San Benito) area Franca Gargiulo, office manager at the Salinas district office, said.

Gargiulo said she wasn't sure yet how many would be needed for S-Night because she hasn't heard back yet from the different cities as to the numbers of shelters and places that need to be checked for homeless.