

Homeless Count

**By Scott Neufeld – North Shore Outlook –
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A man sporting a scraggly beard and tattered, ill-fitting clothes pushes a shopping cart, stopping periodically to poke through a trash can: this is the stereotypical portrait of homelessness.

But as more working people find themselves without a home, it's no longer possible to identify street people by the way they look, explains John Langer of the Salvation Army.

"You do run into people who just couldn't pay the rent this month – there are definitely working guys on the street," Langer said.

Several dozen volunteers will soon be scouring the streets with the difficult task of identifying and counting the local homeless population. The count covers a 24-hour period from March 10-11 and volunteers across Metro Vancouver will visit shelters, bottle depots and other spots where the poor might gather.

This is the third count since 2002 but this year there's a greater sense of urgency to get the numbers right. For the first time the federal government will use the count as a measure to allocate funding for homelessness, says Robyn Newton, project manager for the Social Planning and Research Council of B.C.

"(Ottawa) is asking communities that apply for funding to demonstrate need," she said. "I think there's a lot at stake this time."

In the 2005 homeless count, North Shore volunteers found 58 homeless people living in shelters and 27 people living on the street – the lowest total among the six Metro Vancouver sub-regions.

The North Shore count nearly doubled in 2005 from the 44 people recorded in 2002 and Langer says from what he's seen that could happen again.

"I'm hoping people will be (surprised)," said Langer. "The problem with homelessness is that it's something that's not visible to everybody."

Newton said as their counting methodology improves, the final number increases and comes closer to a true reflection of the homeless population.

"The anecdotal evidence is that there will be an increase," Newton said.

But getting a true count is difficult because many North Shore homeless don't want to be found, Newton said.

"It's difficult particularly in West Vancouver because people come here to hide," she said. "It's really hard to find people in the bush."

To underline the importance of the count, the Salvation Army has organized an event to make sure as many local homeless are counted as possible.

On March 11 at noon they will be hosting a luncheon. But in addition to food there will be specialist nurses on hand to offer foot and wound care.

"A lot of these guys unfortunately don't have medical care cards," Langer said. "A lot of these guys have issues with their (health) and it definitely affects them."

Homeless count organizers are still looking for a few more volunteers.

A training session for volunteers is slated for March 4 at the District of North Vancouver hall. For more information call 604-990-2454. To volunteer with the Salvation Army call 604-988-7225 or drop by 105 West 12th St. in North Vancouver.