

Forum tackles homelessness

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A concerted, cooperative effort involving government, service organizations and the public is needed to ease the tide of homelessness in the Lowcountry, a challenge that has only grown during tough economic times.

That was the message that came out of a meeting held Wednesday in preparation for a fall summit on homelessness that is being organized by state Rep. Wendell Gilliard, D-Charleston, and others.



About 30 city and state officials, social service workers, church leaders and others gathered at Charleston County Library's main branch to discuss the plight of the Lowcountry's homeless. They shared statistics, experiences and strategies. And most also shared a belief that the problem is growing and beyond the means of any one agency to solve.

Gilliard said South Carolina and the rest of the nation simply must do more to ease the plight of the homeless, especially veterans. Nationally, it is estimated some 300,000 veterans are homeless. That is shameful in the most prosperous nation in the world, he said.

"We give trillions of dollars to other countries and then forgive their debts," he said. "Yet we don't take care of our homeless right here in our own backyard. Something is not right with that picture."

Gilliard told the crowd he plans to travel to Washington, D.C., on Sept. 9 to speak with members of the state's congressional delegation about the homeless problem. He hopes to obtain more funding to address the problem and enlist the aid of lawmakers for a seminar on homelessness he's planning for November at Burke High School.

A rally for the homeless also is being planned for Sept. 26, featuring a march from Marion Square to City Hall. In addition, a summit on homelessness is in the works for late October, possibly at The Citadel.

Becky Van Wie, associate director of the Lowcountry Continuum of Care Partnership, said a 2007 survey showed nearly 2,400 people were homeless on any given day in the Lowcountry with only 862 beds available to provide them shelter.

The number of homeless has likely increased since that time, given the economic downturn and the high cost of living in the region, she said.

One recent study showed an annual income of nearly \$27,000 is needed to afford the fair market rent of about \$675 per month on a two-bedroom apartment in the Charleston metro area, Van Wie said.

Chuck Coward, executive director of Charleston Outreach, said the scope of the problem is too much for any one agency and requires that organizations that serve the homeless work together to find solutions. "We need collaboration, not isolation," he said.

Cassandra Jamison, director of One Stop Career System, agreed, saying it is a challenge to help people move beyond homelessness in this economy. Homeless people need jobs and income to secure a home and stability.

But many employers are reluctant to take a chance on people who may have mental health problems or criminal records when there is a host of other applicants without these issues, she said.

"We have a task in front of us, we really do," she said.