

Gilliard discusses homeless crisis

Lawmaker focuses on veterans' plight

BY GLENN SMITH

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South Carolina needs to build a stronger network of services and support to prepare for a "new onslaught of homeless" created by a crushing recession and the horrors of war, state Rep. Wendell Gilliard told a group Monday.



The Charleston Democrat called together outreach counselors, government representatives and others at North Charleston City Hall to discuss how best to meet the needs of the Palmetto State's homeless. After visiting shelters and makeshift encampments, Gilliard said he is troubled by reports that some of the needy are being refused help and that homeless veterans aren't getting services they deserve.

Gilliard said the state doesn't even know for sure how many homeless veterans are living in South Carolina. Nationally, it is estimated some 300,000 veterans are homeless. That is shameful in the most prosperous nation in the world, Gilliard said.

"We are the greatest country in the world, no doubt, but I've seen Third World countries treat their veterans better than we do, in some cases," he said.

Gilliard is a sponsor of bills that would require the state to tally the number of homeless people and shelter beds in each county and to study homelessness, unemployment and other issues facing veterans.

Gilliard and others also are planning to hold a summit of sorts in August to discuss solutions, boost cooperation and draw attention to the services available to help the homeless. Details still are being worked out, but those in attendance Monday pledged their cooperation. Weighing heavily on the group were the deaths of two homeless people last month in Charleston.

Selena Wilson, clinical director for Crisis Ministries homeless shelter in Charleston, said the facility served some 1,600 people last year and helped about one-third find new housing in the community. Co-worker Willie Collier, the shelter's director of veterans services, also pointed out that the shelter accommodated 181 homeless veterans since July.

But Wilson acknowledged that the economy has strained the shelter's capacity at times and that some folks have been turned away when there was no more room.

Community activist James Johnson said he recently was contacted by a woman who was turned away from the shelter along with her 7-month-old baby. He questioned why shelter officials didn't put her up in a motel for the night.

Wilson said the shelter doesn't have money to pay for motel stays and instead refers those in need to other area facilities or services when it's full.

The Rev. Alma Dungee said the problem is that many homeless don't have transportation to get to shelters in other places, such as Summerville. "They end up in the streets," she said.

Participants at the meeting said churches and other faith groups are interested in lending support, but many need help in starting programs and figuring out what assistance is available. Dungee said groups need a central place to go to get that information.

Gilliard said he also would like to see shelters, such as Crisis Ministries, re-evaluate their policies that block entrance to homeless people under the influence of alcohol and drugs. He said that option should be exercised only when someone refuses to accept treatment after they receive shelter.

Wilson said Crisis Ministries does its best to help people receive the shelter and treatment they need but that people must abide by certain rules, including sobriety.

Reach Glenn Smith at 937-5556 or gsmith@postandcourier.com.