

Legislators seeking a headcount

Losing jobs means losing homes for many in state

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The Post and Courier

Saturday, April 18, 2009



State-purchased tent cities for the homeless?

Only if the government finds it necessary.

A group of S.C. lawmakers, including three from the Lowcountry, have introduced a resolution aimed at discovering how many people are homeless — "as aggravated by the current recession" — in each of the Palmetto State's counties. It also seeks the capacity of homeless shelters and calls for a study to determine the feasibility of buying tents to be used as temporary shelter.

The House of Representatives will vote on the resolution next week, said Rep. Wendell Gilliard, D-Charleston, one of 11 co-sponsors. You don't have to go far to find the homeless in downtown Charleston. A visit to Crisis Ministries shelter on Meeting Street can be overwhelming. Careworn men and women vie for attention. Their faces show the desperation. They want to tell their stories. They need someone to listen. Gilliard has made it a frequent stop on his rounds through the city. "You have to see it, smell it, taste it," he said. "Being an elected official, I can't allow this (homelessness) to happen."

Among about 150 people sleeping Friday night at Crisis Ministries was 57-year-old Shirley Clarke of Bluffton. She's been out of work since February, when her legs were injured in an automobile accident. She came to Charleston because it has a good public transportation system and a shelter, she said. Sean Kerr and his wife and toddler son were spending their fourth night at the shelter. The Augusta steel worker was laid off Feb. 18. He hoped to hear today about a job in Charleston. Meanwhile, he takes his showers in a communal bathroom and sleeps in the men's building at the shelter while his wife and child sleep in the next building over. "I feel like I'm worthless because I can't provide for my family. It breaks my heart," Kerr said. "I want to do the best I can for my son and I can't. My hands are tied." Some of the men living at Star Gospel Mission on Meeting Street are business professionals. "I've had people here with master's degrees and Ph.D.'s," said the Rev. William Christian. "They've lost their jobs, their houses. They've lost everything." Christian's facility houses a maximum of 26 men who pay \$80 a week for their room and board. There are no other homeless shelters downtown, and Crisis Ministries estimates nearly 3,000 homeless people live on the peninsula under bridges and in makeshift camps in the woods.

Homeless counts generally come in far below the actual numbers, Christian said. For example, one U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development bi-annual study in 2007 estimated that 512 homeless people live in the Lowcountry. The figure counts the homeless in shelters and uses a formula to estimate how many other homeless people there are. Christian said a true study would have to send pollsters to the shadowy crevices where the homeless stay. "If it takes that, we ought to do that, by any means," Gilliard said. Gilliard fears more working people will lose their jobs and homes to the recession, and he said the state has a responsibility to help. If the proposed resolution is approved, the S.C. Department of Social Services would conduct the study working in conjunction with local departments. Findings would be reported no later than Jan. 31, 2010.

Also sponsoring the resolution are Anne Hutto, D-Charleston, and David Mack, D-North Charleston.

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