

Asheville plans to end homelessness in 10 years

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More than 500 homeless people live on the streets of Asheville, according to the Asheville Homeless Coalition's 2008 count, but many homeless men and women said they haven't given up.

"We do little things that fill in little cracks in the system. Nonetheless, we tend to get a couple boxes of socks for the homeless. I knitted 55 caps a couple weeks ago. It's just a simple knitting pattern and it's all handmade by me," said President of the Asheville Homeless Network Moss Bliss.

More than 10 years ago, a car crash significantly damaged Bliss' finances, leading to him living on the streets. He soon became an active participant and the eventual president of the local homeless network, a nonprofit organization for the homeless, by the homeless.

"We are unlike any other organization. We are a membership organization for the homeless. I think it's ironic that when the homeless people go to a shelter, the people working there treat them like scum," the Los Angeles native said. "You'd think people who work at a shelter would be there and try and make sure the homeless are made to feel welcome and hopefully valuable."

In response to Asheville's homeless problem, the city created the Asheville-Buncombe Homeless Initiative, which includes the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.

One aspect of the 10-Year Plan includes putting housing first.

Bliss, who has been homeless for 11 years, utilizes a housing program the federal government implemented.

"I am technically homeless. The federal government has a program called Shelter Plus Care. It's locally administered, but it's through housing and urban development," Bliss said. "You had to have two major criteria. You had to be homeless and you had to have a mental health diagnosis, and those being the case, I got housing through Shelter Plus Care."

Though Bliss is classified as homeless, or in his words, "technically homeless," individuals like him are not counted as homeless in Asheville Homeless Coalition's official count.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, most studies only count



Ian Shannon - Assistant Photography Editor

Michael Huberts calls the streets of Asheville home for now while he searches for a job. The Asheville Homeless Coalition included Huberts as one of Asheville's homeless persons in their 2008 count.

people who are in shelters or on the streets. The Asheville Homeless Coalition survey also classified people in this way.

"The homeless statistics are badly under-reported. With the reporting system, if you're sleeping on a friend or relative's couch, you're not homeless. We call those people couch surfers," Bliss said. "Give people access to food. I don't care what

the label is."

A newly organized group in Asheville agrees, but has a different focus than the Asheville Homeless Network. Asheville United focuses on the well-being of the homeless and their treatment in society.

"Take one issue and unite on one issue and comprehensibly address it. We're not even saying we can solve this problem,

we're saying we can comprehensively address it. Because it hasn't, in this city, been comprehensively addressed," said Scott Young, active member and coordinator of Asheville United.

After a homeless person sent a letter to Mayor Terry Bellamy and members of city council asking for assistance, the homeless community created Asheville United.

"It is our belief that in the United States of America and in the city of Asheville in the state of North Carolina, that the most important person is the most disenfranchised minority, not someone who's got money and political power," Young said.

In an effort to increase the community awareness of the level of homelessness in Asheville, Asheville United has various plans.

"We're going to have a message-in-a-bottle campaign. We're going to have an 'I am the face of your discrimination' campaign," Young said.

The group also said it wants to join forces with the arts district in illustrating faces of the homeless.

Through various ideas, Young remains persistent about the role Asheville United will play in helping those without an address in Asheville.

"When this campaign wins, and it will win, it may not be this election. It may not be next year. This campaign will be in place until we're done and then we move onto the next issue. You cannot address homelessness without simultaneously addressing poverty, health care and education. So it's a very long-term plan, but we're going to be in this city and as we grow you will see more of us," he said.

Sophomore international studies student Emma Hutchens said she hopes to see the city do more for the homeless.

"I feel like Asheville has a really large homeless population that the city is attempting to address with a 'stray cat' philosophy. You know, like the idea that if you ignore the problem it will go away," Hutchens said.

Bliss said he agrees.

"The whole concept of what America is does not include taking care of our people. Most people don't even think about homelessness except to throw things at people or to complain about those drunks over there or those druggies," he said. "We've got to start realizing we're in the same boat and start paddling the same direction."