

Homeless count late Wednesday night in Elgin, across Kane County



Kane County Veterans Assistance Commission Superintendent Jake Zimmerman will be among those involved with a count of homeless people in Kane County that is part of a broader count going on across the United States this month. (Mike Danahey / The Courier-News)



By **Mike Danahey**
Elgin Courier-News

JANUARY 24, 2017, 6:11 PM

Late Wednesday night, Kane County Veterans Assistance Commission Superintendent Jake Zimmerman will be among people in Kane County tasked with counting the number of homeless living in the county.

"This will be the first time I and other VAC employees will be taking part in this effort," Zimmerman said. "Our hope is that if we encounter any homeless who are veterans, we can direct them to the assistance they can get and deserve," Zimmerman said.

The Kane County Veterans Assistance Commission takes part in the Kane County Homeless

Veteran Task Force, an effort that began in September and which involves the Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans in Wheaton, PADS of Elgin, Lazarus House in St. Charles, Hesus House in Aurora and the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital near Maywood, Zimmerman said.

In turn, that task force is part of the Kane County Continuum of Care, Hines Chief Public Affairs Officer Rick Fox said, and it keeps a "By Name List" of veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Veterans who come in contact with any provider of homeless services in Kane County and sign a release of information will be placed on that list, Fox said. The task force meets regularly and works to connect every veteran on this list to eligible services.

"We currently have 17 active and six inactive on the By Name List. The inactives have no recent contact with any providers, but we keep them on the list because we don't know where they are. Veterans on this list could be homeless, literally living on the street, in transitional housing, and/or at risk of homelessness," Fox said.

At the task force's most recently monthly meeting, Hines Supportive Housing Clinical Manager Don Donahue asked Zimmerman if the Kane County Veterans Assistance Commission staff would help with a nationwide "point in time" count of homeless people that is done every January and provided to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development by about 400 Continuums of Care across the country. The data is used to shape HUD's homeless assistance programs.

Zimmerman noted that in recent years the VA has made eradicating homelessness among veterans a priority, as it had been estimated that 1 in every 4 homeless people across the country was a veteran earlier this decade.

Those numbers have dramatically improved, Zimmerman said. Offering Kane County figures as example, the 2016 count identified 286 individuals living in emergency shelters, 55 living in transitional housing and 14 unsheltered people. Of those 335 homeless, just 17 were identified as veterans, with just one of those veterans living unsheltered.

Fox provided information noting that there were 22 homeless veterans in the 2015 count and 34 homeless veterans in the 2014 Kane County count.

According to information from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website, the estimated number of homeless veterans in the United States declined by nearly 50 percent between 2010 and

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HUD's Continuum of Care point person for Kane County count is Julia Thavong, who is a planner in the Development Department. Thavong explained that in Kane County, its continuum is an ad hoc group that includes agencies in the area that address homelessness.

"The Hines VA Homeless Program has worked with the Kane County Continuum of Care for years. Our current program coordinator has been a part of this program for the last eight years and the relationship extends back even longer than that," Fox said.

The county has been involved in the HUD counts for at least 15 years, Thavong said. The work had been done by a consultant, Thavong said, but is being done in-house this time, so this is the first year in which she has been involved in the project.

Every other year, the numbers provided to HUD come from "HMIS," a homeless management information system used by her department, Thavong said. This year, the numbers include those in the HMIS database along with the point in time count, which is done across the country the last week or so in January, Thavong added.

"HUD looks at these numbers not only for grant formulating, but as a look to see where to improve services," Thavong said. "It's mostly about providing the best services."

From 10 p.m. Wednesday until 3 a.m. Thursday people will be out across Kane County, particularly in towns along the Fox River, for the count. Local police departments will be assisting in the effort, Thavong noted.

Zimmerman said he and other VAC staff will be working with Elgin Police Department late Wednesday night on the Elgin count. From the police side, the effort is being coordinated by Sgt. Eric Echevarria, Cmdr. Ana Lalley said.

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