

# MORE PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS IN SKAGIT COUNTY, SURVEY FINDS



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

**A homeless man, who asked to remain anonymous, selects free clothing** Wednesday at The Gathering Church near downtown Mount Vernon. The church is one of several Skagit County locations used during the annual homeless count.

## Annual tally has increased every year since 2005

By **FRANNY WHITE**  
Staff Writer

**MOUNT VERNON** — Kim Olander stood inside a cold church basement Wednesday and waited for the homeless to come.

Nearby was a stack of blank surveys that asked where respondents slept the previous night. Choices including a shelter, inside a car, at a friend's house or outdoors were listed next to a row of empty boxes, waiting for someone to check them.

In the span of about an hour, just three people filled out surveys to participate in the

county's annual one-day homeless count at The Gathering Church in Mount Vernon.

At the same time, volunteers fanned out throughout the county to visit the temporary shelters common to the homeless, including inexpensive motels, under bridges and in parked cars. Whoever they found was added to a tally that also included clients of local social service agencies, such as food banks and the Sea Mar health center.

Foot traffic may have been slow at The Gathering late Wednesday morning, but

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### Skagit County homeless count

2005	1,182
2006	1,211
2007	2,149

The count includes people temporarily living with family or friends

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■ **SOURCE:** State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development

# Homelessness: 'It's just a painful statistic'

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Olander, a caseworker for the Skagit County Community Action Agency, said many Skagitians don't have a reliable roof over their heads.

"They'll come in and sit in the (Community Action) office just to warm up," she said. Olander uses such anecdotes to say homelessness is on the rise in Skagit County.

Community Action has coordinated the local homeless count since 2005. That was the same year the Legislature passed the Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act, which set forth the goal of cutting homelessness in half by 2015. The annual count, which happens one day each January in each Washington county, is intended to help track progress toward that goal.

This is the fourth year that the count has been taken. In the last three, Skagit County's numbers seem to indicate that the local problem is getting worse, not better. The first count measured 1,182 homeless people, while last year's survey identified 2,149, according to the state Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED). The local results

include people who are temporarily living with family or friends, who the federal government does not classify as homeless. Of 2007's count, 940 people fit into that category.

The results for this year's census will be available sometime in April.

But Nick Mondau, who coordinates CTED's homeless information system, doesn't characterize the state's homeless population as growing.

"While the numbers are larger, we can't say the problems are getting worse," Mondau said. "But they're not getting any better."

Statewide, there were 38 more homeless people counted in 2007 than in 2006, a 0.4 percent increase. But Mondau's supervisor, Tedd Kelleher, said the number of homeless people per capita actually decreased by 1.6 percent in that same time frame. Kelleher wants to see another year's worth of data before saying whether progress has been made.

"If we make real progress, you'll see it in the numbers," Kelleher said. "Anything less than 5 percent isn't real progress to me."

The state's 2007 report on homelessness attributes last

year's small statewide increase to expanded count efforts. Olander says the Skagit count's effectiveness has improved. More volunteers, a better idea of where to look for the homeless and the continued involvement of different social service agencies make the local count more reflective of reality. But Olander still believes there are more people here without a home to call their own.

One of those people is Scott Etherington, who chatted with count volunteers about Wednesday's 20-degree weather after filling out a survey. Etherington said he was working a \$30-an-hour job at Boeing when he quit in 2001, sold his house and decided to live a more simplistic life.

He's been bouncing around ever since and has lived at the Friendship House shelter in Mount Vernon for six months. When asked whether he thinks homelessness is increasing, Etherington shrugged.

"The poor will be with you always," he said. "It's not a bunch of bums; it's just a painful statistic."

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