

# HOMELESS ON THE RANGE



## How Sitgreaves Housing Council's PIT Count Helps Address Our Region's Unique Homelessness Challenges

by Amie Rodgers



Just as the idea of home can mean different things to different people, the same can be said for homelessness. The traditional stereotypes of pushing one's earthly possessions in a shopping cart or holding a cardboard sign are not only narrow and insulting, but also purely an urban concept. One must have a street corner to stand on and shopping carts aren't built for offroading.



In rural areas like Navajo and Apache counties, a much broader definition of homelessness seems to apply much better. "The definition of homeless by the federal government is being unhoused or living somewhere that is not built for permanent residence with services like electric and water," notes Community Liaison for the Sitgreaves Housing Council Nathan Updike during our recent interview. The Sitgreaves Housing Council is a collaboration of community members who strive to assist the growing homeless population. Whether it be providing services, resources or solutions, SHC comes together to better serve our communities' needs.



As the Community Liaison, Nathan has spent countless hours searching the hillsides near and far to get an accurate count of the population in Navajo and Apache counties that may have a roof, but are living in what is considered temporary housing without the benefit of electric or water.

"One of the main parts of my job is the PIT Count which stands for Point In Time Count. This is the process of attempting to count every homeless person with a survey in Apache and Navajo counties. If you are familiar with the area, you will realize that by federal definition this is what we are seeing in places out east of Snowflake and Holbrook. Areas around the communities of Vernon and Concho also have a number of families living in un-

*(Continued on page 12)*





*(Homeless on the Range: Continued from page 10)*

sustainable housing. Along the I-40 corridor between Winslow and Sanders has a ton of people living in these conditions. Of course, there are people who are choosing to live off the grid, but if you are living in a tent and hauling water, it is safe to say that you are unhoused,” says Nathan.

Needless to say, getting a head count of a diverse group of people who (for a diverse number of reasons) don’t generally want to be found is definitely not a walk in the park. “It is not the easiest of tasks. We are looking for people willing to help go out and do surveys. I am available to train interested individuals. Over the summer, I ran across a lot more people, which means even more work the next time around. The challenge lies in how to get these individuals counted so that we can get an accurate count to benefit our counties. It is also important to not offend people being counted and help them understand the importance of being counted. There is also a substantial homeless veteran population and in order to account for them, we work with veterans organizations like Fishers of Men to make sure they are included. So, in addition to traveling to these areas, the surveys are provided to organizations assisting the homeless. They are distributed and collected by members of the coalition twice a year. January and August are PIT count deadlines.”

So, why is it important to have an accurate PIT Count?

“The PIT Count is instrumental when it comes to funding from the state to local organizations that help the homeless. Right now the

majority of funding in the state goes to Maricopa and Pima counties because they are non-rural areas and to be honest, have a lot more visible homeless. What I have found is that Navajo and Apache counties have been undercounted for years,” says Nathan.

In addition to being counted for more state funding for our area, the PIT Count also serves as an opportunity to address immediate needs and connect people with local resources. “It is troubling to know that there are people living in rented sheds out on a piece of unimproved land who are out of gas and hoping their neighbor will bring them water. During the summer count, I came across a woman living in a tent with three kids out east of Holbrook. They were all malnourished and had not seen a doctor in years. With the help of our partners in the local Coalition to End Homelessness, we got them connected with Catholic Services in Holbrook to get them hot meals, helped her apply for medical benefits, etc. Around the same time, I came across a couple living in a dilapidated travel trailer, not hooked up to any services who had just had a baby there... as in had the baby in that trailer. We were able to help them get a birth certificate for their baby and apply for medical benefits and assistance. Unfortunately, many of the transient population don’t have an ID. Whether they never had it or lost it, it is important that we help them get one when we can so they have more options because it is pretty hard to do anything without identification. It is a lot of work, but we spread it out among local providers and many hands make light work.”

According to Nathan, once the surveys are done in the field and collected from the other organizations, the data is compiled to submit to the state to be analyzed. “The state will then come back to us and tell us what areas we need to be focusing on. We will take their advice and approach it in a Navajo and Apache county kind of way so it is customized to the people that are here. By working with local organizations like senior centers and food pantries to find individuals to be counted, we can then come back to these partners and bring funding and support.”

For more information about the Navajo Apache County Alliance to End Homelessness or to become a volunteer in an upcoming PIT Count, please visit [www.SGCDC.org](http://www.SGCDC.org).