



Wednesday
December 26, 2007

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The changing face of homelessness

By Herb Johnson

With the holiday season upon us, many of us are enjoying elaborate meals, family traditions and spending time with loved ones. We are counting our blessings, citing our family, jobs and health. But, in the midst of the holiday season, I offer another reason to be thankful.

A year-round issue often spotlighted during the holidays, the homeless in our communities remind us to be thankful for the community-wide benefit of charity organizations that serve and support the homeless. The homeless population in San Diego is abundant. The Regional Task Force on Homelessness estimates that there are nearly 10,000 homeless in the San Diego region. With mild weather and ample open spaces such as beaches, canyons and parks, San Diego is a haven to those without permanent shelter.

Having worked with the homeless population for many years, I see the face of homelessness changing. There are more seniors, teens,

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women with children and veterans living on the street than ever before.

Homelessness traces back to a variety of roots. Many homeless individuals suffer from physical or mental illness, or drug addiction. Homeless women, children and teens are often fleeing domestic violence. Many of the veterans, elderly, farmworkers and day laborers who

percent from 2005 to 2006). The National Coalition for the Homeless also notes that families with children are among the fastest-growing segments of the homeless population, currently at over 40 percent.

In April 2006, the Regional Task Force on Homelessness conducted a survey of the homeless in the San Diego region. Nearly half of those surveyed reported a physi-

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are homeless have a limited or fixed income that does not meet their living expenses.

Nationwide, the National Alliance to End Homelessness noted that while veterans make up about 11 percent of the general population, they comprise a disproportional 26 percent of the homeless population, and that number is increasing at a dramatic rate (eight-tenths of 1

cal or mental disability. The top factor listed as keeping the homeless on the streets was a lack of affordable housing, followed closely by income. More than 77 percent of respondents were unemployed, and 45 percent reported substance abuse. Aside from housing, respondents most needed transportation, food and dental health services.

San Diego's homeless do have

resources available to find these needed items: homeless service centers such as St. Vincent de Paul, Volunteers of America, the YMCA and the San Diego Rescue Mission. Many of these centers offer emergency shelter, long-term housing, food, toiletries, health care services, counseling, treatment for chemical dependency, job training and placement assistance.

Many service organizations for the homeless rely solely on individual gifts and corporate donations, rather than government funds. For example, one local organization, which houses about 400 people daily, saves taxpayers an estimated \$60 million a year, as its residents do not end up in emergency rooms, mental health clinics or on the street. That offers something to be thankful for this season.

So, as you celebrate your holidays, remember those who will be spending this season on the streets, without the love and support of close family and friends. Better yet, consider supporting or volunteering at your local homeless service center to not only give back, but also get an inside look at another reason you have to be thankful this season.