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Plight of Homeless Energizes Law Students

FORT WORTH, Texas – More than 35 students from Texas Wesleyan University School of Law battled chilly temperatures on the evening of Thursday, Jan. 29, to gather census data about the Fort Worth residents who spend many of their nights in the cold.

The Tarrant County Homeless Coalition (TCHC) conducted a homeless count on Jan. 29. More than 500 volunteers turned out to help. The data gathered will be used for a census count of the number of homeless people in Tarrant County.

Student volunteers from Texas Wesleyan attended training at the law school on Monday, which was run by TCHC executive director Cindy Crain. The reasons students chose to participate ranged from a desire to get involved in the community to past experiences that struck a personal chord.

“An estimated one in four homeless persons is also a Veteran, and a significant percentage of those Veterans have served in a combat zone,” 2L Damon Goff said. “My personal experiences, both as a battle captain in Iraq and a young enlisted soldier in Haiti, drive the empathy I feel for those former soldiers. I believe that efforts like the TCHC Homeless Count can [provide] actual relief for our community's Veteran homeless.”

After gathering at staging areas and being assigned to police escorts, small groups of volunteers traveled designated routes in neighborhoods throughout Tarrant County. The groups gathered data on the city's homeless population, including information about the health of those living on the streets. While some groups did not encounter any homeless people on their routes, they found telltale signs that people had been living in the areas they searched.

“We ended up not finding any homeless people [on our route],” 2L Amber Altemose said. “We did, however, go into a few vacant condos where some homeless people had been. You could tell that whoever was there had started a fire on the floor to keep warm. The experience was definitely an eye-opener. The living conditions of the vacant condos were very poor and it made me realize the importance of helping the community.”

Seeing the living conditions of some of the city's homeless reminded 1L Charlotte King of the importance of public service work.

“Seeing beds made of cardboard and an old blanket certainly made me appreciative of the home and bed that I have,” King said. “As a law student interested in going into public service, I found this experience inspiring. It is easy for me to get caught up in studying and worrying about memos,

finals, etc. I really appreciated being reminded of all that I have and why I am working to get a degree that can help me serve people in this community.”

The program was introduced to students’ through the efforts of Associate Professor of Law Aric Short, who was involved in the count and decided to post an announcement in the interest of garnering student participation. He said the result was much more than he ever imagined it would be.

“I was thrilled with the students enthusiasm about this project,” Short said. “Almost 40 students attended the training lunch and several others attended online training. Having students participate in this homeless count is consistent with the law school’s tradition of encouraging pro bono and community service work, and it’s a great way for students to help those in need.”

The last count of the city’s homeless was conducted in 2007. Data from that count showed 4,042 people as homeless in Tarrant County. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reported on Saturday that while the final numbers have not been tallied yet, initial reports suggest that this year’s figures are lower than in 2007.

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