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Agencies seek city's help to end homelessness

By [Sharon McBrayer](#) | The News Herald

Resources aren't keeping pace with the increase in homelessness in Burke County. Now advocates for the homeless are asking the community's elected officials to help them meet the needs.

David Collins and Martha Hemphill with Burke Continuum of Care called on the Morganton City Council last week to help.

Collins and others plan to make a presentation to the town of Valdese and the county government as well.

Burke Continuum of Care is made up of 21 agencies. Collins said local governments can help with funding and grants and strategic planning for housing the homeless. He said without government sitting at the table, any plan to reduce or end homelessness would be impossible.

Collins and Hemphill presented the numbers of homeless people found during a point-in-time census in January. They recorded 167, 97 percent of them Burke County residents.

That total is down 18 percent from 2008.

The number that most disturbed the council members, it appeared, was that 24 percent of the homeless people were children, up 25 percent from 2008's count. Collins said the number of homeless families was up 75 percent.

Collins told of a young couple who lost their baby in a wreck. The loss devastated the couple. They moved in with his parents, who both worked at a Marion factory. The parents lost their jobs.

Eventually, all of them ended up living in a vehicle. They came to Burke County so the the younger woman could attend Western Piedmont Community College.

Collins also talks about coming upon a toddler sitting at the edge of a wooded area in Burke County when the point-in-time count was done. Her family lived there, he said.

About 30 percent of the homeless live in places not designed for human habitation, Collins said.

He described gaps in services for the homeless — programs designed to prevent homelessness, shortages in emergency beds, a shortage of sufficient housing units for women and children and the lack of transitional housing for ex-offenders and supportive housing for veterans.

Burke Continuum of Care hopes to help meet the needs of the homeless by getting funds to fill those gaps and by working with local governments to develop shelters and services for at-risk groups. It also will work with agencies, businesses and governments to develop "rapid rehousing opportunities for the homeless" and to create affordable and accessible housing.

Morganton Mayor Mel Cohen asked Hemphill and Collins about the empty buildings on the campuses of Broughton Hospital and North Carolina School for the Deaf and whether they could be used.

Hemphill said that's something they would like to pursue but they believe the state would be more open to the idea if local government officials are involved.

Cohen and the council offered to assign a city staff member to work with Burke Continuum of Care.