

# Recession's invisible victims

## Homeless population largely unaccounted for

*Editor's note: The following is the first in a two-part series examining the homeless population and their needs in Goshen County. Part two will run June 30.*

**By John Miller**

*Staff Writer*

Barry Donathan has been speed talking for about 20 minutes. Thrilled to have an audience, he's been relay-

ing the specifics behind a run of bad luck that has left him and his family living in a tent in Pioneer Park.

Donathan is a U.S. Marine veteran and a law

enforcement professional. He holds degrees in criminal justice and police science and is a 5th degree black belt in Kadoka Judo and Ju Jitsu. An Alaska resident for 28 years, he and his wife sold their seven acres of land and moved to Browning, Mont. so their four sons could experience life with four seasons. Once there, he opened a martial arts studio.

And then the recession hit.

"I cut my prices from \$150 to \$30 a week, but it wasn't enough to make ends meet," Donathan said. "Everybody's so poor up there, they didn't even notice there was a recession."

He said he tried to find work with the local police, but they claimed he was over-qualified. His wife Tammy is a registered nurse, but when it came time to renew her license they didn't have the money to pay for the necessary classes.

Donathan receives a pension from the Marines every month, but it's not nearly



Photo illustration/ John Miller & Chad Dixon

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enough to support a wife and four sons with. So they made a decision to move back to Alaska, and sold all of their possessions to pay for the move.

But after a series of mishaps foiled the moves and a relative's land in Missouri, he was told he could claim turned out to be infested with snakes, they collected what remained of his \$611 pension check and hit the road back to Montana. They got as far as Torrington when they ran out of gas.

"The people here

have been so helpful and friendly," Donathan said. "The police paid for us to stay two nights at a motel, and they've brought us a few coolers full of supplies. When our tent was shredded by the wind last week, one merchant actually gave us a replacement."



"Is there a homeless and transient population in Torrington? Yes, especially in this economy," Marie Fitts of First Church of the Nazarene said. "Do we need a shelter? Yes. There are no jobs for lower income individ-

uals and families. This is not a town that supports those with a marginal education."

According to Charlene Morris of Land of Goshen Ministries, their church has given out innumerable food baskets, but their ability to provide such services are very limited and can't be sustained for more than a few days.

"We can provide food, and occasionally put up money for a hotel for a night," Geri Zeimens of the Torrington branch of the Wyoming Department of Family Services said. "But our services are limited to a few days. Occasion-

ally, we'll buy someone a bus ticket to Scotts bluff or Cheyenne so they can go to a shelter because we don't have any in Goshen County."

One of the biggest contributors to the influx of the displaced is, paradoxically, the prison. According to Zeimens, many of those hired were from out of state and in need of a job. They broke leases and left behind stacks of bills to come to Torrington sight unseen, only to find very limited housing for the pay range they agreed to.

"I see people from the prison all the time,"

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# ble victims

Zeimens said. "Either they're living with a friend from work, or they can't afford food, or any number of other problems."

"Some of the prison employees are really bad off," Fitts said. "They have no place to live, no finances. I work with a population that's disenfranchised, that lives paycheck-to-paycheck, knowing that they are one check away from being out on the streets."

However, aside from churches and social services, it is difficult to find anyone who is aware there may be a problem. Part of this

stems from the perception of exactly what homeless is, that if someone is not sleeping outdoors then they are not homeless. One Goshen County Sheriff employee said if he had to show where a homeless person stayed, he couldn't do it.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federal definition for homeless is "an individual who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence," and "who has a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised publicly or privately operated

shelter, an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings."

According to Brenda Eickhoff-Johnson of the Natrona County Community Action Partnership, a person or family is considered homeless if they simply live with family or friends in a dwelling only designed

for one person or family.

The Natrona County organization collects information concerning homeless population from every county in Wyoming to be used to obtain federal funding and/or grants to combat homelessness. However, not every county files a report, nor are they required to, Eickhoff-Johnson said.

"I can't see where Goshen County has ever given us any numbers," she said.

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