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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. — Donna McAllister is certain she would have died this winter if not for a stranger who took her home during a snowstorm.

The woman provided her with warm winter clothes and boots, too. It was a rare break in her struggle to get help.

McAllister said she's tried to stay Clarksville's Room in the Inn program, in which a different church opens its doors to the homeless each night from November until April 1, but she found it too difficult to get back in time to check in if she didn't have money for the bus.

"We are damned if we do, damned if we don't. No matter where we go, there's something going to stop us," she said. "You can't panhandle to get money to get a room, but you can't stay out here either. What am I supposed to do?"

Between panhandlers scattered around town, makeshift camps behind buildings and people walking with bags of their belongings, it's clear that Clarksville has a homelessness problem.

Many are working to address the issue, but the records confirm what McAllister demonstrates: Despite the money and effort being put forward, available services are rarely being used.

In January each year, a national "point-in-time" count is conducted by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development to understand the demographics of homeless populations to better serve their needs.

The count helps HUD determine how to distribute funding to communities.

Last year Clarksville was granted \$1.66 million by HUD, and this year's money is still awaiting council approval and the creation of an action plan to submit to HUD.

In Clarksville, the count is conducted by Buffalo Valley, an organization that provides homelessness resources like addiction rehabilitation and transitional housing.

#### [Homeless in Clarksville: Johnnie Pittman](#)

The 2016 count estimated almost 500 Clarksville residents who fit one of the many definitions of homelessness — a number that fluctuates day to day, according to Keith Lampkin, the city's housing and community development director.

Of those 500, 262 are school-aged children and at least 25 are veterans.

The variety of definitions of homelessness, the constant movement of the unsheltered homeless and those moving from transitional housing to more permanent residences make it nearly impossible to have a truly accurate number, he says.

The unsheltered homeless can remain almost unseen unless they choose to panhandle.

Panhandling is not illegal in Clarksville, but it becomes a punishable crime if it crosses into aggressive panhandling.

Aggressive panhandling is defined in state law as following, using derogatory language toward or threatening someone who doesn't want to give a donation.

Panhandling while under the influence of drugs or alcohol also falls under this statute.



(Photo: Ayrika Whitney / The Leaf-Chronicle)

## THE STORIES OF CLARKSVILLE'S HOMELESS

Links to each person's complete story in the article.



### JOHNNIE PITTMAN, 29

Johnnie Pittman, a Florida native, has found himself homeless before but he says "this fall right here was the worst one."

This most recent time was the result of an altercation with a roommate Johnnie claims was threatening to shoot him and says he acted in self-defense.

Johnnie was staying at the Salvation Army temporarily until he was dismissed after an incident with another resident.

Since his dismissal, Johnnie has been sleeping in a friend's Jeep with all of their belongings.

"This here hurts me. Every night I cry. I cry about this every night. Like what did I do to deserve this?" says Johnnie who is visibly exhausted.

"By my faith in god and my belief, I am still surviving. I'm still going on. I'm still holding on because my Lord and Savior."

Ayrika Whitney / The Leaf-Chronicle

## Shelter coming

In May 2014, Clarksville Mayor Kim McMillan held a mayor's forum to discuss homelessness, with almost 100 organizations and representatives in attendance, she recalls.

The main concern repeated among all the groups was the need for a permanent shelter in Clarksville.

Two years later, that issue is about to be resolved.

The city has purchased a building on Crossland Avenue to be renovated for a transitional housing shelter for families. Renovations are scheduled to begin June 1 in hopes of being completed by the end of August.

"We have listened to our service providers, and this is what they asked for, and this is what we are going to provide," Lampkin said.

Urban Ministries, one of the larger service providers in the area, submitted the winning proposal for a five-year contract with the city to run the shelter.

The organization has been providing services to the homeless for about 30 years, and Lampkin expressed confidence in the organization's abilities, citing its experience with the women's shelter.

The building was purchased for \$150,000 by the city using HUD Community Development Block Grant funds, and renovation costs are estimated at \$100,000 using CDBG and Emergency Shelter Grant money.

[Homeless in Clarksville: Fred Wilson](#)

## Solutions over temporary fixes

The homeless population overall has decreased in Clarksville compared with previous years.

Though it is hard to pinpoint why, the focus on the causes of homelessness may have contributed, McMillan said

"You have to kind of figure out why people are homeless first and then how you can address it," she said.

"If you work with them and help them get a job, then all of a sudden now they have the money to get an apartment. They get out of that revolving door of the system. We are trying to break the cycle."

Several service providers offer resources to help homeless people obtain a GED or job training to help them become self-sufficient.

Many find it difficult to find a job on their own because of the lack of a permanent address and reliable transportation.

Some people, however, either don't want the help or don't know how to find it.

On Jan. 8, 2015, when temperatures fell into single digits at night, the city opened a network of emergency shelters. But despite the effort, and the danger of staying outside, 240 of the city's 310 beds remained empty, according to the city's reports.

On the two previous days, 266 of the 325 beds were empty on Jan. 6, and 252 of the 320 were empty on Jan. 7.

[Homeless in Clarksville: Donna McAllister](#)

It's unclear whether people found somewhere else to stay, such as at a friend or family member's home, if they didn't want the help, or, possibly worse, they didn't know about the shelters.



(Photo: Ayrika Whitney / The Leaf-Chronicle)

One of the biggest challenges is to reach the homeless to inform them about the resources offered in Clarksville, especially the unsheltered homeless living on the streets.

Many learn about the organizations through word of mouth, which, as the numbers show, isn't good enough.

[McMillan looks to help homeless Clarksville veterans](#)

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## HOMELESS HELP

The following agencies provide service shelter and services to the homeless in Clarksville:

**Salvation Army Shelter**, 210 Kraft St., 552-5350. Shelter can house up to 36 men and 24 women and has four family rooms. On-site chapel offers church services Sundays at 11 a.m.

**Old Firehouse Day Shelter**, 1498 Golf Club Lane, 542-0381. Individual needs assessment and day shelter from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday-Friday. Referrals provided for Room In the Inn, providing evening and nightly shelter by local churches Nov. 1 to March 31.

**Safe Harbor**, 108 Kraft St. 503-2000. Faith-based program offers homeless men or women a future without addiction.

**Urban Ministries**, 217 S. Third St., 648-9090, referrals for shelter and other assistance.

**Loaves and Fishes**, 215 Foster St. 645-9020. Soup kitchen meals are served 10:30 a.m.-noon, Monday-Saturday.

**Manna Café Ministries**, 1319 E. Franklin St., across from Cook's Market. 933-0970. Gives out food boxes and hot meals Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Manna House.



(Photo: Ayrika Whitney / The Leaf-Chronicle)

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