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 Morganton, North Carolina

July 30, 2007

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Saturday, January 20, 2007

**MORGANTON** - There are 20 beds for the homeless of Burke County.

That's enough for one fifth of the wandering population. All others rest wherever they get sleepy.

In July, Burke's Homeless Committee counted 69 bedless residents. Names continued trickling in after the count, upping the unofficial results to more than 100, says Connie Brockland, director of Resource Development at Burke United Christian Ministries.

Without a central shelter, homeless people are sleeping anywhere warm, Brockland adds.

"I asked one man where he was going to sleep and he said, 'The laundromat is open 24 hours, I'll go to bed there,'" Brockland says. "Another told me he barricades himself in clothes racks and waits for the store to close. Then he goes to sleep."

Brockland recommends men try The Meeting Place, a long term shelter for homeless males. She says if there is a waiting list, those men are often sent back to BUCM.

The Meeting Place turns away two men a week, says Resident Manager Mike Cochran.

An emergency shelter would benefit everyone, says Public Safety Officer Jason Whisnant.

"It would be a lot easier balancing time and management if we had a known location to take them," he says.

As it stands, police typically refer homeless individuals to churches



59-year-old Steve Watson  
 Apryl Blakeney (The News Herald)

who help for the night. Repeat trespassers are arrested, Whisnant says.

#### Fleeing Burke

None of the county's shelters offer immediate, short-term assistance. For that, people have to migrate.

At McDowell Mission Ministries in Marion, nearly 15 percent of the clientele comes from Burke County.

Last year, 28 women and children and 33 men from Burke County ventured to McDowell County looking for help.

Brockland wonders if we prefer to dump them there rather than offering accommodations here.

She says Burke County has transit funds for homeless travelers. If their cars or motorbikes break down, the police can authorize money to repair the vehicles. Yet there is no money for an emergency shelter.

"It is almost like we want to get them back on the road and on their way," she says. "That is easier for us."

Without help from the Marion shelter, Brockland doesn't know how Burke could manage the homeless population.

"It is sad they do more things for our people than we are willing to do," she says.

Bill Sexton, director of the McDowell men's shelter, says it's his job to get folks off the street.

"It is not a neighborhood thing," he says. "It is not like I am baby-sitting your children.

"But it is frustrating when the resources are available and nothing is done."

He says the need and facilities are here and inadequate funding is not an excuse. The McDowell men's shelter leased property from the state for \$1 a month, he says.

#### You're Already Paying

Brockland says the money is out there.

She says HUD has millions available for community programs.

Last year only 12 of North Carolina's 69 eligible counties applied for the cash.

"Someone could build a shelter from the ground up with that money," Brockland says. "And they would still have the funds to staff and furnish the building."

Brockland says building a shelter will actually save taxpayers.

"Millions of wages are tied up in transporting homeless or taking them to the ER when their fingers get frozen," she says.

Sexton agrees. He says the Marion community didn't embrace the shelter immediately. But they grew to love it.

"Their taxes are supporting these people already, why not do it in a positive way," he says.

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