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## Chiefland homeless issue goes unanswered



**Nyla Lockwood of Chiefland speaks about homeless people in the area as she approaches the Chiefland City Commission with a plea to recognize the issue and to become involved in helping prevent people from dying due to overexposure to the cold on freezing nights.**

**Story and Photo By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 12, 2017 at 8:07 p.m.**

**CHIEFLAND** -- Nyla Lockwood of Chiefland is a senior citizen who cares about people, even homeless transients passing through the city where she lives.

On Monday night (Jan. 9), she went to the city government's leaders with hope in her heart that they might be able to help her in a mission to keep people from dying from exposure to sub-freezing temperature, or from dying due to carbon-monoxide poisoning by staying in a vehicle with its engine running for hours on end as it sat in one place.

Chiefland Fire Chief James Harris offered a suggestion that seemed reasonable and possible. However, as it turned out, the idea of the Tri-County Community Resource Center accepting donations to pay for motel rooms would not work.

Lockwood defines a homeless person as being a man, woman or child who does not have a structure in which to sleep during the night.

With two nights of sub-freezing weather recently in Chiefland, Lockwood felt she should inform the Chiefland City Commission that there are homeless people within the city limits, and she believes their lives are in danger when the temperature goes below freezing.

In her initial research, Lockwood said she found there are resources for homeless people to obtain food – including at all Levy County public schools for the enrolled schoolchildren, who all eat free breakfasts and lunches five days a week during the school year at public schools.

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Private schools and children who are home-schooled are among the students who do not get free breakfast and lunch in Levy County.

Lockwood told the Chiefland City Commission that there are between 75 and 100 people sleeping in cars, on cement slabs at cemeteries (because they stay warm for a bit after the sun goes down), or they are sleeping in tents just off of the Nature Coast Trail, or in other areas that are not houses, apartments or mobile homes.

She said the city government has not recognized the issue or done anything to resolve it.

Her first proposal was for the city to find a vacant building with bathroom facilities. Lockwood asked City Manager Mary Ellzey what temperature the Tommy Usher Community Center was kept at overnight.

Ellzey said "very low."

Lockwood said that is warmer than the 28 to 30 degrees Fahrenheit of outdoors on some nights. This would not be a facility for use, Lockwood proposed, except during freezing nights.

There are many families that are not living in a place that can be considered stable housing.

Lockwood spoke about one woman who is using her van to house herself and her three children. To keep warm during those sub-freezing nights, Lockwood said the woman ran the engine of the van so that its heater would work.

This might create a fatal situation, Lockwood intimated to the City Commission.

There was some discussion about people choosing a homeless lifestyle, or preferring to spend money on drugs rather than housing.

There was some discussion about the people who are homeless in Chiefland being on their way farther south in the winter, because the weather is warmer there.

The idea to put any homeless people in the Tommy Usher Community Center became like vapor in the wind, it disappeared.

As for the Tri-County Community Resource Center, it is a place to help individuals in the areas of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties, which includes Chiefland.

In Thursday (Jan. 12), the leader of the resource center provided a statement when she was asked about the homeless situation in the Tri-County Area.

"Thanks to the support of our community partners, all patrons who come into our Tri-County Community Resource Center, including individuals who identify themselves as homeless, are able to receive a number of services depending on their needs," Beverly Goodman said. Goodman is the Tri-County Community Resource Center manager for the Partnership for Strong Families.

"We are able to provide sleeping bags," Goodman added, "food and clothing as well as referrals to Grace Marketplace or the North Central Florida Homeless Alliance. It is our goal that every patron leaves the Resource Center with a plan to gain stable housing and have access to the resources they need in the meantime."

In the City of Gainesville, there is GRACE Marketplace, a city-operated facility, which is funded by Alachua County as well as the City of Gainesville, to help the homeless individuals there.

There is the Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry Inc., too, which is doing business as the North Central Florida Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry.

This coalition is a non-profit agency established as a coalition to advance the

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collaborative efforts of helping agencies in Alachua, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy and Putnam counties to end homelessness.

As for Lockwood's complaint that the City Commission of Chiefland is ignoring the homeless problem in that city, or that it is "sweeping it under the rug," that might be a bit too harsh.

There are homeless people in every Florida county.

Government leaders in cities and counties across the state respond to the problem of people dying from overexposure to the elements in different manners.

The Tri-County Community Resource Center, located at 15 N. Main St. (U.S. Highway 19) is not able to accept money to pay for motel rooms for homeless people. However, it is an excellent starting place for any person who is needy or abused.