



November 30, 2008

## Reaching out to the homeless

For too long, the homeless, City Councilman Dave Ware believes, have been invisible in Hattiesburg.

Whether they live in their cars, in the woods or under bridges, or make their way into shelters at night, they're below the radar of much of society.

Ware, with other homeless advocates, is determined to change that.

"We want to provide help to everyone we can," Ware said.

To that end, Ware set up the Pine Belt Coalition on Homelessness and believes that by joining forces with local homeless outreach groups the city will be able to address an underlying problem more aggressively.

But Ware's efforts aren't without challenges.

"The homeless thing is so abstract," said the Rev. Bill Prout, executive director of Christian Services Inc., a local outreach ministry that provides a multitude of services to hundreds of the city's needy every day.

And that makes wrapping your resources around the problem that much more difficult, he said.

There's also the challenge of breaking down public stereotypes that have stigmatized the homeless population and make them more reluctant to come forward.

"Many people in Hattiesburg just think that homeless people just sit on the corner at Wal-Mart and beg for money - and some do," said Kathy Garner, executive director of the AIDS Services Coalition shelter in Hattiesburg. "They perceive homeless people as different, (but) they have the same aspirations and goals."

And given the country's volatile economy right now, homeless advocates say the population in Hattiesburg is swelling.

"(The economy) is forcing the price up on everything," Prout said. "As a result, it's putting these folks in a bind they haven't been in before."

"There's no question you and I could be in the same situation tomorrow."

Which makes combating homeless now even more critical for city officials.

### **Difficult to count**

One of the most difficult challenges officials face is knowing just how many people are actually homeless in the Pine Belt.

Every two years the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires that communities conduct one-night counts - referred to as a "point-in-time" survey - of homeless persons, both at shelters and living on the streets.

HUD uses the data from the study to determine how it will allocate federal funding to programs. The next PIT count will be conducted in January for the Pine Belt.