Project Homeless Connect helps those in need

By Zach Tyler, Star Staff Writer, ztyler@annistonstar.com | Posted: Friday, April 10, 2015 1:40 am

Sometimes, Ken Anderson said Thursday, the stress of not having a job, a car or a stable home gets to him.

The 52-year-old is disabled, and said when that stress gets too intense, he hits the streets, bouncing between the homes of family and shelters. But that’s not the life he wants.

“I don’t want to be here, there and everywhere,” Anderson said. “That’s too much pressure for me ... I just want advice.”

Anderson got an opportunity to get that advice Thursday, when many aid groups met at The Bridge in Anniston to offer help and services to those who need them most during an event dubbed Project Homeless Connect. Those in positions similar to Anderson’s who made it to the meeting center said they appreciated the help, but the event’s organizer said she’s afraid too few county residents living comfortably realize just how many people are experiencing homelessness in the area.

Event organizer Misty Ledbetter described it as a “one-stop service day” for people who are experiencing homelessness. She said she prefers to use that phrase, rather than simply labeling someone as homeless.

“People tend to stigmatize” those living on the street or out of shelters, assuming they ended up there because of substance abuse or other negative habits, she said Thursday.

“The community needs to see ... it could be a single mother with two kids who got kicked out of her house because she missed work to take care of a sick child,” she said.

“We’ve had people come through who have master’s degrees,” Ledbetter added. She’s a member of the Homeless Coalition of Northeast Alabama, which advocates against homelessness in Calhoun, Cherokee, Dekalb and Etowah counties.
She’s also an attorney with Legal Services Alabama, a nonprofit that provides legal advice to those with low or no income.

Ledbetter spent the day simultaneously overseeing the project at The Bridge, a meeting space at Anniston’s First United Methodist Church and offering legal representation to those who came in off the street.

The goal, she said, is to bring awareness to the number of people experiencing homelessness in Calhoun County, and to show those people there are an array of agencies that offer help.

Seventeen of those service agencies set up tables around a large auditorium in The Bridge. Some offered to sign applicants up for food stamps, Social Security cards or driver’s licenses. Others, such as the Anniston Housing Authority and The Right Place, offered applications for free or reduced-cost housing.

The event started at 9 Thursday morning. By noon, 62 people had come through, seeking help with legal issues, affordable housing — even haircuts.

“For a lot of them, it helps their self-esteem,” said Diane Farr, a volunteer with the Etowah County Baptist Association.

She gave 15 or 20 haircuts from a makeshift salon area at the back of the auditorium. “They feel normal for a day,” Farr said.

Although he didn’t get a haircut, D’wan Abduallah, who lives in a house built by Habitat for Humanity and sometimes struggles to make ends meet, said the personalized attention he got Thursday made him feel noticed.

“They greet you like you are someone,” the 54-year-old said. He got help from free medical screenings offered at the event.

Ledbetter said volunteers from Jacksonville State University and the Anniston Fire Department offered blood pressure and blood sugar testing, as well as screenings for HIV.

Abduallah had his blood pressure, which he worries about, checked by nursing students from JSU.

“I stay so hyped up all the time, because of stress,” he said. The students gave him a clean bill of health.

Abduallah appreciates the help the project’s organizers and participating agencies try to offer, but thinks only a portion of the people who most need that help seek it out.

“I try to encourage people to reach out,” he said, putting it like this: “The closed mouth don’t get fed.”

Ledbetter said those in dire straits may not know where to look for help, which is why she thinks the
project’s mission is vitally important.

But she also hopes it makes people who aren’t experiencing homelessness give more thought to the struggles of those who are. “We like to say that everybody is two steps away from homelessness,” she said. “It could happen to anybody.”

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