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## Homeless in OC: Titan volunteers join census effort

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(Micah Augimeri-Lee / Daily Titan)

At the steps of a Methodist church, census volunteer Jessica Allen discovered she had something in common with a Fullerton homeless man: They had attended the same high school. The coincidence made the encounter hit close to home, the 22-year-old Westminster volunteer said.

Allen was one of the many volunteers to offer their time in the early morning hours of Jan. 28 to help count the homeless population of Orange County. It was her first time.

The biennial effort to count and survey the unsheltered homeless population of the United States relies on the efforts of volunteers from all backgrounds and experience levels. The last OC count drew around 800 volunteers, while the 2017 count saw approximately 1,200 volunteers, 297 of which were deployed from CSUF.

Cal State Fullerton student Allan Rivas got off work at 12 a.m. before the count.

Rivas understands what it means to be poor. He came to the United States from El Salvador when he was 12 years old. Rivas said growing up in his home country, families lived on a few dollars a week.

"I think that's why I'm not afraid. I know what it's like to not have a lot of things. I know what it's like to just make it through," Rivas said. "I see them as people just trying to survive."

Rivas signed up for the count as part of his Policing the City course. He hopes to enter law enforcement to further serve his community.

"I think that's the main thing that got me into law enforcement—that I just want to be able to help as many people as possible," Rivas said.

As soon as the count was complete, Rivas went straight to his second job. Rivas and his group scoured the city streets before deciding to split into groups of two to cover more ground.

CSUF student Michelle Norwood, 36, stuck with Rivas to continue their search.

Norwood is also in the Policing the City course. She said the course requires students to participate in service learning, which she is no stranger to.

Helping at-risk youth plays a significant role in her life. She was considered an at-risk youth when she lost her father at age 13 and her mother at age 17, leaving her to be the primary caregiver for her three younger sisters.

"Since our parents passed away when we were so young, we didn't have anybody to show us the importance of education and those types of educational values," Norwood said. "I learned them on my own and that's why I'm here."

When Norwood isn't spending time with her husband and 14-year-old son, she works with homeless people in Norwalk in the public safety department. She also serves as an adviser to a cadet program in Norwalk and oversees the Jr. Park Ranger Program.

"If you can make an impact in the life of one individual, it makes it all worth it," Norwood said.

The volunteers trekked across railroad tracks and through a chain link fence where Norwood spotted a homeless man sleeping near the bleachers of a baseball field.

He was wrapped in a blanket head to toe with an umbrella propped up to shield him from the elements.

The man continued to sleep as the group of volunteers talked about him just a few feet away from where he lay. After counting the man, the group decided to leave him a bag of supplies that had been provided to all the volunteers to pass out to the unsheltered homeless people.

Wilbur Sham, a volunteer from Diamond Bar, Calif., quietly approached the man and set a zip-close bag next to him. The man continued to sleep as the bag fell over on his feet.

*Bryant Freese, Megan Maxey, and Sarah Wolstoncroft contributed to this story.*