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Squatters hidden in N.O.'s abandoned houses often need more help than other homeless people

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By Katy Reckdahl Staff writer

The odor was foul, a byproduct of human sweat, feet, rot and urine. But it meant they were in the right place.

Somebody was living there.

The two men in blue polo shirts pulled aside a graying, splintered board, revealing a gaping hole in the side of a house in the 7th Ward. Then they walked in, flashlights pointed ahead.

"Homeless outreach," Shamus Rohn yelled.

"Is anyone here?"

He trained his light toward a disheveled mattress, a discarded mirror propped at its end like a headboard.

Rohn's colleague, Mike Miller, nodded toward orange peels on the dirt floor. "Fresh," he said.

Within the past month, Rohn, Miller and other caseworkers from Unity of Greater New Orleans have searched for signs of life in more than 250 abandoned buildings in nearly 200 square blocks in the 7th Ward and along the Tulane Avenue corridor as part of the agency's Abandoned House Project.

The ongoing survey, sure to be consulted in January when federal officials prepare a census of the homeless, adds to Unity workers' anecdotal evidence of homeless people using abandoned buildings in various neighborhoods.

Unity teams previously focused on securing housing for the hundreds of people, many of them severely ill, living in sprawling tent cities at Duncan Plaza near City Hall and underneath the elevated Interstate 10 expressway near Canal Street. But now teams are systematically looking for squatters sleeping in abandoned buildings, believing they are in worse shape than those who seek out services at soup kitchens, shelters and drop-in centers.

--- The most vulnerable ---

The squatters tend to be older, more disabled and less likely to have received psychiatric care in the past, Rohn said. A few have already risen to the top of Unity's housing lists, which give priority to those most likely to die or be victimized if they stay on the street.

Two of the squatters the teams encountered last week alone suffer from severe brain seizures.

In a month's time, the Unity teams have counted nearly 175 bedrolls or mattresses in derelict buildings. Many of the makeshift beds were still in use, judging from what was found in the rooms: fruit, a warm candle or fresh feces. Clues also came from dated items such as receipts, prescriptions, newspapers, even freshness dates on crumpled beer cans.

But it's unclear how many people are represented by one active bedroll.

"That's the big unknown," Miller said.

In some abandoned buildings, several people may frequent one space, using the same bedding, Miller said. But he also meets squatters who keep bedrolls in two places.

Rohn tracks every address and every person through a spreadsheet that tallies bedroll-to-abandoned-house ratios in each neighborhood they enter. With this, he hopes to get a sense of how many other squatters are out there, living in New Orleans' estimated 71,000 abandoned buildings.

--- Katrina homelessness ---

Inside a shuttered corner barroom in the 7th Ward, posters for local bluesmen littered the floor when the Unity team visited last week. On a far wall, a few crack pipes rested on a table below two homemade wooden silhouettes of women sipping cocktails.

Next to the resin-coated smoking tubes was a pile of neatly stacked pay stubs from a temporary-labor service a few blocks away.

The name and address on the stubs matched the voter-registration record of a 60-year-old man who lived in an apartment in eastern New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. From the voter records, it appeared that the man may have lived before the storm with relatives who didn't return to the city.

It's a common scenario for many elderly, developmentally slow or mentally ill individuals whose family networks and homes were destroyed by Katrina, leaving them on their own for their first time in their lives.

Some squatters stake out places in familiar neighborhoods, where they grew up or had friends. Others flop somewhere near work or drug supplies.

--- Not enough detox beds ---

As the clock registered almost 10 p.m., Miller said the time was right to find squatters inside buildings.

He and Rohn walked up to a broken-down house where they had met two men last month. This time, a faint voice responded to their knock on an upstairs door. "Homeless outreach," Miller said.

After some coaxing, a slight man and woman emerged sheepishly from a room littered with syringes. The couple, both 34, said they were from the East Coast, unlike most of the city's homeless people, who are from New Orleans.

Like others interviewed for this article, the two, Eric and Sonya, asked that only their first names be printed for fear of arrest.

They moved to New Orleans in November because Eric landed a job at a shipbuilding company here, they said. But then he was fired for absenteeism, leaving them scrambling to get a \$20-a-day heroin fix.

Eric pulled a business card from his pocket. He said he called the number every morning, hoping to secure detox beds for them. But so far, no luck.

Sonya's eyes welled up. "I'm scared a lot out here," she said. "And things seem pretty hopeless right now."

For these two, the process would start with detox that Unity can arrange, said Angela Patterson, who heads the organization's outreach team. "Then when they're thinking clearly, we'll let them make their own plans and help them with them," she said, in a kind but matter-of-fact manner honed through many years of outreach work.

The search team made a stop at a Tulane Avenue house where seven people were holed up together, including Gary, 45, who grew up in the neighborhood near North Tonti and Conti streets.

"I think I'm depressed," he said. "I should probably talk to somebody about it."

Just before midnight, Rohn and Miller headed Uptown to look for a Vietnam veteran they met recently as he collected aluminum cans along Tchoupitoulas Street.

"Mr. Jeffrey?" Miller yelled, climbing up concrete blocks to get to the door of an empty warehouse where the man stays. The building's interior was tidy: a bedroll, a small salvaged table and chairs, and several large athletic trophies placed in a curving row.

A small lit candle sat on the concrete floor, a sign that the man might have just left.

It might appear simple to track someone once you know where they sleep, Miller said. But homeless clients can be elusive, especially with anyone they don't yet trust, he said.

"Mr. Jeffrey has spent 30 years on the street," Miller said. "So he can hide."

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