



Joan Hunter, who rides the bus to work and home, talks about one of her clients at the Lancaster Office on Mental Retardation while on her way to the Great Plains Winter Sleepout Friday.

Locals join sleepout to support homeless

By Corey Russman
Staff Reporter

More than 130 people left the comfort of their homes and braved below-freezing temperatures Friday night to increase awareness of Lincoln's homeless.

Many spent the night in boxes, others in their sleeping bags, and some covered up with newspapers as they participated in the Great Plains Winter Sleepout, an event to raise money for Lincoln organizations that help shelter, feed and clothe the homeless. More than \$25,000 was raised during the evening. Dave Murrell, chairman of the sleepout, said the Peoples City Mission, the Freeway Youth Station and the Friendship Home each would receive 20 percent of the proceeds.

About 30 percent will go to five other organizations that help the homeless. The final 10 percent will be given to the Lincoln/Lancaster Homeless Coalition, comprised of 30 groups, to pay for the organization of next year's sleepout, Murrell said.

Nearly 3,000 families and single men in Lincoln will become homeless during 1992, he said.

About 550 people attended the educational segment of the sleepout from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. The Lincoln Community Playhouse performed skits for the crowd. Entertainers also

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sang songs, and many told of their experiences of being homeless.

Lt. Gov. Maxine Moul, a speaker at the sleepout, said she hoped the evening would be a "commitment to the homeless and near-homeless in Lincoln."

"We need to increase awareness to help bring this plight to an end," she said.

Moul told participants about Gov. Ben Nelson's commitment to helping the homeless, and spoke of LB1192. The 1991 bill increased the price of documentary stamps for real estate transactions by 25 cents.

The bill will raise nearly \$1 million over two years, Moul said. The money generated will be used to build shelters and will go to organizations that help the homeless.

Moul quoted anthropologist Margaret Mead, who said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world." In fact,



Hunter gets some warm doughnuts for breakfast from the Salvation Army canteen.

Moul said, sometimes they are the only ones who can.

Moul said the night represented a "genuine increase of awareness and education across the state, not only in Lincoln."

The night was beyond what she expected, she said. People are beginning to take the homeless situation seriously, she said.

Golden Key National Honor Soci-

ety students and UNL student-athletes presented 400 cans of food and 250 items of clothing that were donated during their food and clothing drive two weeks ago.

Debbie Dedrick, vice president of Golden Key, said the homeless issue had never been tackled, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus seemed to be removed from the problem.

Dedrick, a senior pre-med major, said she hoped the sleepout would show that nobody was immune to the problem.

"We are all affected by it either directly or indirectly," she said.

Troy Branch, a Nebraska football player, said the sleepout was a "step in the right direction to nip the (homeless) problem in the bud."

Branch, a senior history major, said he believed people were ignorant of the homeless. Some assume people are homeless because they don't work hard enough, he said, which is not true. In reality, Branch said, everyone is one or two paychecks from being homeless.

Branch said he hoped the sleepout would show that homelessness could happen to anyone.

Debbie Hostert, a senior agricultural education major at UNL, said many people "go through their daily

lives with complacency and take things for granted."

"We need to have empathy for the less fortunate," she said.

Tammy Thiessen, a senior accounting major, said there were two types of homeless: those that want to be homeless and are happy, and those who don't want to be and are lonely.

Thiessen said she didn't believe the homeless problem was invisible, just that people ignored it.

Steve Naumann-Sandoval, a UNL graduate student in school psychology, said he participated in the sleepout to support a good cause.

"I needed to get involved, and this is my opportunity," he said.

Naumann-Sandoval said he wanted to experience what it was like to be homeless and bring about an awareness that the homeless problem was real. He said he hoped to take what he learned during the evening and tell

others about his experiences.

Organizers of the event stressed that the night was not typical of how a homeless person would spend the night. Sleepout participants were able to eat pizza, cold sandwiches and could have coffee, tea or hot chocolate. The Salvation Army served the drinks and food.

Several other Nebraska cities, such as Omaha, Lexington and Hastings, also had events in conjunction with the sleepout, Murrell said. Cities in Missouri, Kansas and Iowa also participated in the regional event.

This year's event was the second annual sleepout in Nebraska, Murrell said. Last year, he said, Omaha had a sleepout, and its success prompted Lincoln to have its own this year.

Murrell said he hoped Lincoln would continue to have a sleepout "year after year so that we can eventually wipe (the homeless problem) out."

Photos by Michelle Paulman



While actors perform a skit on the stage, Hunter turns in for the night.



Hunter dons her third pair of socks at about 8 p.m. as the evening grows colder.

Sleepout

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now was dotted with clumps of multi-colored blankets that moved only when someone rose for a trip to one of 10 porta-potties.

"The homeless must use the bushes," Hunter said.

By 4 a.m., the temperature had fallen to 26 degrees, and 120 people remained. Four Red Cross volunteers, one police officer and three Salvation Army workers fought drowsiness to keep watch over the sleeping crowd.

During the final two-hour stretch, bodies began to stir. John Barrette, business editor of the Lincoln Journal and a director of the Gathering Place, a homeless refuge, was one of the first to rise.

"Everybody is responsible for (the) homeless, not just the government," Barrette said. "But I'm less attracted to government solutions; they often take dignity away."

The Gathering Place offers food and hospitality to anyone, not only the homeless, he said. Speakers and programs are offered to the public at noon daily.

Curt McConnell, a Lincoln author and former reporter, said he was surprised and pleased by the crowd that remained Saturday morning.

Lincoln has an evident homeless problem, he said.

"I see some people around who I know are homeless," he said. "You see the same guys hanging out in the public library day after day, going back and forth between downtown and the city mission, that aren't get-

ting a whole lot of help."

Larry Schneider of Lincoln spent the evening at the sleepout. He said he felt compassion for the homeless, and had once sheltered a homeless man in his home.

Hunter said he thought being homeless was "like imprisonment in a war camp."

"Instead of being locked in, you're locked out," he said. "You keep wondering when the endless routine is going to end."

Hunter said the sleepout reminded her of the painful routine she got a taste of when she was homeless in Seattle.

"When they came by and said there was orange juice and coffee, you felt thankful for any little thing they wanted to give you," she said.

Lt. Gov. Maxine Moul also sampled a night of homelessness, camping out in a cardboard box. She insulated herself against the cold with a blue ski mask, snow pants and boots.

Moul said the sleepout gave her a new appreciation for the homeless.

"The best learning experience was people getting together having commitment to public awareness on problems of (the) homeless," she said. "The speakers dispelled myths that people have about the homeless. It can be people from all walks of life — women and children, as well as men."

At 7 a.m., after feasting on warm doughnuts, the participants rolled up their sleeping bags and began filtering out of Centennial Mall.

Leonard remained standing by a cement wall, holding his tattered bedroll over his shoulder.



Sleepout participants snooze on the grass at Centennial Mall bundled in their sleeping bags at about 4 a.m.



After a cold night sleeping on the ground, Hunter warms her hands in a parking garage.