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Project connects low-income, homeless with much needed help

By TAHLIA HONEA

Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Rafael Ponce supports his wife and two children with two part-time jobs. Expenses such as dental come second to rent and food.

Two of Ponce's teeth have been throbbing with pain and infection.

As part of Project Homeless Connect, an effort to connect those who need help with what they need — a dentist pulled his two teeth Thursday in a mobile dental van with volunteer dentists.

At the event, held at Skagit Valley College and put on by the Skagit County Coalition to End Homelessness, those who showed up could get an identification card, a free haircut or help with housing. But dental care was the most popular service.

"I feel compassion for the people," said Dr. Robert Klein of Lynden, who was volunteering in the dental van. "I've had a toothache. I know how bad it is, and it's more prevalent in the homeless and low-income population."

The state cut adult dental care in January, leaving many people without the means to see a dentist. Some patients were turned away Thursday because the dentists could only treat so many people.

"There is a lot of need and not much we could do," said Ross Howell, Dental/ Healthcare Access Coordinator for Skagit County Community Action Agency.

Skagit County has one of the highest homeless rates per capita in the state. An estimated 700 people are homeless on any given night in Skagit County, according to the Skagit County Community Action Agency. Those numbers include people "couch surfing," or temporarily living with family or friends.

Last year, the first Homeless Connect event attracted more than 250 people in need of permanent housing or at risk for losing their housing. Event coordinators said this year was even bigger.

Other resources at the event included on-site medical treatment, job search and education resources, veteran support, clothing, counseling, legal advice, and help getting voice mail, substance-abuse treatment, wheelchair repair, methadone and needle exchanges.

Some volunteers washed and scrubbed the feet of the homeless or gave them massages.

Both Everett Stoner, 50, and Larry Beck, 57, of Concrete said they came for help with their vision.

Stoner's broken glasses were fixed. Beck had his eyes checked and made an appointment for eye surgery.

"It's been a really good day," Stoner said as he ate a spaghetti lunch.

Both of the men say they normally keep to themselves as they figure out how to survive.

Beck's biggest worry is how to afford heat for his travel trailer this winter.

"Most people live day to day," Beck said. "I try 20 minutes at a time."

n Tahlia Honea can be reached at 360-416-2148 or thonea@skagitpublishing.com.



Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Larry Beck, of Concrete, receives another serving of lemonade during lunch at Skagit Valley College during Project Homeless Connect, an event meant to connect the homeless or low-income residents of Skagit County to help.



Skagit County Commissioner Sharon Dillon serves spaghetti to (from left) Esther Ramirez, her 4-year-old sister Jennifer Ramirez and her cousin Esmeralda Robles, 5.