

Tempe's homeless will have a chance to meet with social services providers, get legal advice and even get their hair cut on Friday. Tempe will host its eighth Project Homeless Connect at the Tempe First United Methodist Church on University Drive.

The event - 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. - will give Tempe's homeless access to a laundry list of social services provided by both nonprofit and public organizations.

Held quarterly, the event gives homeless people a chance to get identification, talk with a lawyer, meet with shelter representatives, access drug treatment, get their hair cut and learn about nonprofit services that they might otherwise be unaware of. People who need help are paired with volunteers who assist them.

The project, which is the first of its kind in Arizona, began in January 2007 and was modeled after a similar program in San Francisco.

Last July, more than 100 volunteers helped with Project Homeless Connect and U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., and his staff showed up as well.

Tempe homeless coordinator Theresa James estimated Tempe has 300 to 400 homeless people.

"The stereotype here in Tempe is that we just have homeless youth and that's just not true," James said.

The average person that her office works with has been homeless for 40 months. Most are mentally ill and many are drug users. About 25 percent are women and 10 percent are military veterans.

The causes of homelessness vary, but James said the most common factors include a lack of affordable housing, poor wages, medical problems and the need for transitional and temporary housing.

Since the economic downturn began, James has noticed an increase in people seeking help.

"A lot of people don't want to see the problem," James said. "They just want to move (homeless people) out of here."

That was the case last month with some of the residents who gathered at the Escalante Community Center to voice complaints about transients in their neighborhood park.

One homeless man in attendance said forcing the homeless out of Escalante Park and the neighborhood wouldn't solve anything. "We would have to go some place," he said. "And I believe that place would be another park."

Forcing homeless people from the community would only be a band-aid on a larger problem - poverty, he said.

"The average American is only one paycheck from being where we are," he said.

Brenda Valdez, a resident who spoke at the meeting, was worried about prostitution, drug use and fighting at the park, which is next to her apartment complex. She also is an ordained minister who helps hand out groceries to people on the verge of homelessness every Wednesday at the Calvary Baptist church in east Tempe.

"These are hard times for people," Valdez said. "Very critical times."

Outreach program aims to help Tempe's homeless

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James stressed that better relationships between the community, nonprofits and the city are the only way to reduce homelessness.

"Whether people want to admit it or not it affects all of us," she said. "We've got to work together."