The coalition of agencies and non-profits that help the homeless in Brevard County is organizing and making changes to comply with federal regulations and in order to continue to receive funding.

By 9 a.m., Kevin McGarry had sweat spotting his gray T-shirt and soaking into his Marines ball cap, and he had not yet been into the woods. But he had already met a mother and her two daughters, 2 and 5 years old, in a Winn-Dixie parking lot, handing over $60 in gift cards and helping make arrangements to get them to a hotel. The woman, who is an Army veteran, and her family spent the previous night in their Chrysler Sebring.

And he had already met a man at a transitional housing complex, helping with medical paperwork that could get the man, another veteran, the assistance he needs.

McGarry leads "search-and-rescue" teams that fan out across Brevard County one Saturday a month, looking in Florida scrub for homeless people who need help. McGarry works for National Veterans Homeless Support, one of dozens of local organizations that aid the homeless.

You need not be a veteran to receive his help.
NVHS is taking on more responsibility to find and help the homeless, which is part of a broad overhaul of the Brevard Homeless Coalition, a group of more than 60 organizations that deal with homelessness and poverty in the county.

Deadlines

The coalition is working to meet deadlines established by the federal government, which focused on consolidating homeless-assistance programs and promoting local efforts to end homelessness. This month, the coalition will implement a countywide assessment procedure, which will better match homeless people with agencies that can provide help.

Until now, agencies used varying intake assessments to identify what services a person needed and which agency could best help.

The countywide system will help providers understand what services people need and will determine the severity of their need, said Sky Beard, leader of the coalition's coordinated assessment committee and executive director of the Early Learning Coalition of Brevard.

"I think any time you have a better way to understand the circumstances of an individual or family, it just better provides support and points them in the right direction," Beard said. There will be kinks to work out, however: Some agencies are concerned that a countywide system could involving sharing information about an individual, which could violate federal privacy laws.

The Brevard Homeless Coalition members must also comply with changes at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in order to continue receiving money. HUD typically disperses $860,000 each year to local organizations, but last year that money was cut 5 percent.

Chief among the changes is adopting HUD's housing-first mantra, meaning that getting people into housing is top priority. Finding substance abuse or mental health treatment programs, for example, comes second.

National Veterans Homeless Support is leading the local effort with a rapid-rehousing project, helping connect veterans and others with case managers from various shelter agencies.

George Taylor, the founder and director of NVHS, said 95 percent of the people the search-and-rescue teams find within 180 days of losing their home find permanent housing. After living on the street a year, the odds they'll find a home decreases 20 percent, he said.

On one morning, McGarry hiked into woods off Babcock Street in Palm Bay. Pushing through brush asking, "Anyone home?" he found no one. But there were several tents
and water-filled coolers. He left a card, hoping whoever camped at this site would call, so he could help them.

"That's usually half the problem," he said. "They have no idea what resources are available to them."

Now a doctor McGarry was homeless for several years after leaving the Marines. He now has a doctorate and teaches microbiology at Keiser University.

As a veteran, he can relate to those he helps. But he never turns anyone away. One man approached McGarry when he pulled his pickup into Daily Bread soup kitchen in Melbourne. He needed a couple of bus passes. McGarry pulled them from his pocket. Not a vet?

No problem.

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Who is homeless
Each year, volunteers count or estimate the number of homeless people in the county.
2008  1,899
2009  1,207
2010  1,221
2011  1,889
2012  1,907
2013  1,567
2014  1,567

Online

For more information about the Brevard Homeless Coalition and its member organizations, find the Brevard Homeless Coalition Inc. on Facebook.