

**The News Sun**

# **Avon Park Homeless Coalition moving out of Housing Authority**

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AVON PARK -- The Highlands County Coalition for the Homeless announced Monday that it is relocating out of Avon Park's Southside to its main office on Avon Boulevard and U.S. 27.

Larry Shoeman, housing authority executive director, told the News-Sun in a phone interview on Monday that the contract to case manage Avon Park Housing Authority's emergency transitional housing residents was terminated in October.

"Because of the requirements with our 16-unit housing project, which is financed through the Florida Housing Finance Corporation and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), we will have to have an individual trained to process applicants and meet the requirements of both agencies. The Coalition does not have the training or certification for that or to withstand the scrutiny that those agencies require," Shoeman said.

"They (Homeless Coalition) are blooming because of the economy. They have several new projects going, and they are doing great job bringing much-needed resources into the community," Shoeman added. "We need to make sure that we can stand up to that scrutiny to insure that we continue to receive that HUD funding.

"Having our own person to process the cases will insure that we get the detail and the policies are adhered to and audited," Shoeman said.

The agreement between the two organizations states that instead of paying rent, the Homeless Coalition takes care of the case management and crisis assistance.

Since the Housing Authority has terminated that agreement, the coalition has until December to relocate.

Shoeman said that the new person would not be hired right away. The \$1.1 million rehab of 16 units for emergency applicants would have to be finished, which will start in March, and then there will have to be a screening and interview process.

"The renovation of the units won't take very long, and then we can get going on hiring someone. Maybe April of next year at the earliest," Shoeman said.

From the viewpoint of Richard Reinhardt, Homeless Coalition executive director, the move is not the best for the community.

"The Housing Authority asked us to relocate, and we took offices at the north end of the county by the old Walker Hospital. Because the county has no public transportation, it will be even harder for many folks to get to us," Reinhardt said.

Reinhardt's organization focuses mainly on prevention of homelessness, bringing in approximately \$4 million per year, which is mostly used to help families stay in their homes. According to Reinhardt, it is easier to prevent than to fix homelessness.

"We spend about \$35,000 per month in helping with just electric bills. We are trying to keep families in their homes. Most of the homelessness in the county right now is being caused by unemployment caused by the state of the economy, so we are trying to re-educate and retrain people to help them get their next job when they become homeless. This will make it a little harder for folks to coordinate between the agencies out there," he added.

"We are now receiving 200-300 calls per day from those needing assistance. It is getting crazy, but we are seeking more ways to help bring more help to those in need," Reinhardt said.

Figures provided by Reinhardt show that there are currently 1,800 homeless families in the county, but that number is growing.

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