

## **SOLANO'S HIDDEN HOMELESS THE COLONY: HOMELESS IN THE SUBURBS**

Kevin Fagan – Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, November 13, 2005

---

### **THE SERIES**

Chronicle reporter Kevin Fagan and photographer Brant Ward have covered Bay Area homelessness, beginning with their Shame of the City series two years ago and continuing with recent accounts of successful efforts to reduce homelessness in San Francisco. Today's article expands the coverage into the suburban Bay Area.

**Fairfield** -- Out where newly built stucco houses give way to wooded fields on the outskirts of this fast-growing Solano County city, a ribbon of water called Ledgewood Creek meanders for 300 yards through tall stands of tule reeds and elm trees.

Egrets flap overhead, and turtles, bullfrogs and ducks splash along the shore. In the middle, where the creek widens to a pond, beavers slip forth from their lodge -- a mound of poles and mud -- at sunset to gnaw on their log dam.

The scene would be pristine -- if not for a half-dozen rusted shopping carts thrusting up at odd angles throughout the pond. Or the trash piles compacted many inches into the soil, like so many Indian shell mounds. And the Bedouin-style tent encampments sprawling through the trees, with bicycles strewn about.

Living alongside those egrets, turtles and beavers are Tammy "Wings" Valencia, Patrick Verquitas and about 50 other homeless people who together call themselves The Colony.

While the iconic image of homelessness in Northern California is a disheveled alcoholic sprawled on a downtown San Francisco street corner, the "colonists" of Ledgewood Creek represent another facet of the overall crisis -- out of sight, out of mind, living on the rural edge.

A report released last month by the Association of Bay Area Government's Regional Task Force to End Homelessness showed that of the 4,000 homeless people in Solano, 80 percent -- the highest among the nine Bay Area counties -- are considered chronic, meaning they suffer from substance abuse or mental illness and have slept outside more than a year.

The county has good facilities for its homeless families, but for the chronically troubled there are just 100 shelter beds and one county social services outreach worker. The report

also said that Solano, the region's northeastern-most county, pulls in less money per capita in federal and state homeless-aid funding than anywhere else in the Bay Area. And 84 percent of its homeless live entirely unsheltered, save for ramshackle arrangements like the tents along Ledgewood Creek.

The county and Fairfield, the county seat, plan huge expansions of services and attention to homelessness over the next three years -- but for now, they are perhaps more in crisis, in terms of demographics and resources, than anywhere in the Bay Area.

"We have a lot of people in this county who have decided homelessness is not acceptable, but we are just starting out, really," P.J. Davis, director of the Solano County Safety Net Consortium, said of local efforts to respond to the problem. "We have a fairly unique homeless population, so we are having to come up with very local ways of dealing with it."

While they do, members of The Colony are making do on their own -- without even registering in the consciousness of most Fairfield residents.

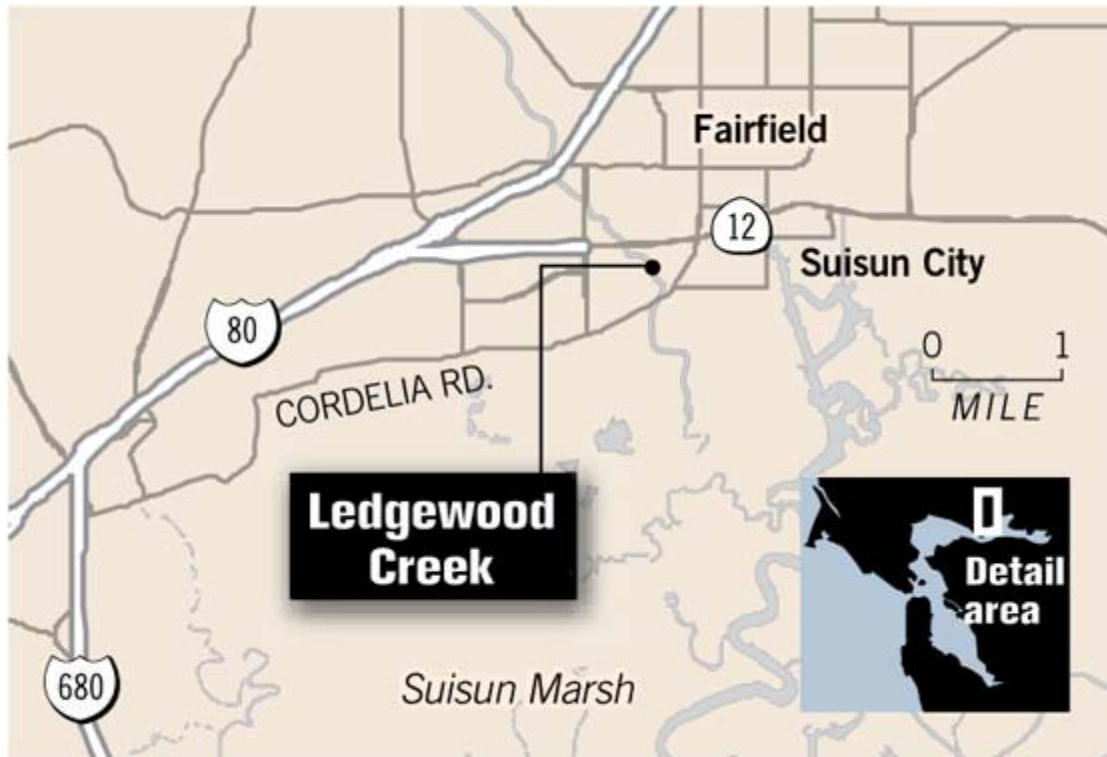


Chronicle / Brant Ward

Tammy "Wings" Valencia cools down in Ledgewood Creek outside Fairfield. The homeless woman says she has become friends with the beaver and an occasional river otter who call the creek home. Solano County hopes to create better treatment programs for dealing with its many chronic homeless. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

"Now why in the world would I ever leave this?" said "Wings" Valencia, 56, as she floated on her back near the beaver lodge one recent sunny afternoon. "It's paradise. You can be free."

Behind her, a family of turtles napped on a log alongside the lodge. When she swims at night, the beavers dart all around her, sometimes joined by playfully squealing river otters and croaking bullfrogs. But during the day it's quiet. As she floated, the only sound -- beyond the distant hum of traffic heading out of Fairfield on Highway 12 a mile away -- was swallows whirring overhead.



Sources: ESRI. GDT

Chronicle Graphic

Valencia, a stocky woman with piercing eyes and a mostly toothless mouth, said that aside from the occasional rousting by police, there is only one unwelcome interruption to life on Ledgewood Creek. "That's this: You can't just stay here all the time," she said with a grin. "You have to go into town for food once in a while, clothes, beer."

The police roustings, which come every six months or so, are the only contacts The Colony gets from the outside world aside from infrequent visits from Solano's lone outreach worker. The police check for parole violators and sometimes tell the "colonists" to move -- which they do, a few dozen feet away. For a week or two.

Then they move back.

They've been there for at least 10 years.

"This is real nature out here, much better than in town," said Verquitas, as he lounged on the dam one evening to watch a family of ducks and chicks waddle along the shore. Ten feet away, a beaver suddenly surfaced, looked around, then dashed back under water with a loud plop of its tail.

"Nobody really cares one way or another about us anyway, so we're on our own -- except for those critters," he said, throwing back his head to laugh. "Which I guess is the way I like it."

---

Unlike many homeless groups, The Colony has no leaders, though there are dominant characters who do most of the talking and organize which tents go where. A lot of this talking and organizing goes on in between jail stints for minor assault, burglary or drug charges.

Valencia, who was cut loose from jail three years ago after a one-year stretch for methamphetamine possession, is one of the foremost members. Another is 56-year-old Verquitas, who two years ago ended a prison term for burglary.



Chronicle / Brant Ward

Patrick Verquitas heads across the railroad tracks to cool himself down in Ledgewood Creek on a warm September day. Verquitas and about 50 others live in an encampment near there. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

Then there are Mike and Kim Russell, an amiable middle-aged couple with no prison past, who usually pitch the main tent and set up the camp kitchen.

There is enough land around the beaver pond that if someone gets irritated with the others, he can pull up his tent and move. But they generally all get along; most, in fact, grew up in Solano County. In contrast to San Francisco, where heroin and crack are king among the drug-abusing homeless, methamphetamine is the choice for those who toke at The Colony, so it gets shared right along with the food and clothes.

Verquitas, a stringy man with a bushy gray beard and a skeleton tattooed on his left arm, insisted the drug problem isn't too pronounced, though.

Police and business owners have made panhandling virtually impossible in town, so the colonists survive on church charity giveaways and by doing odd jobs like sweeping up, stuffing newspaper inserts, clearing trash. And you can't work, let alone travel a couple miles into town and back -- mostly on bicycles -- if you're always high, he said.

"Listen, it takes a lot of effort to live out here," Verquitas said. "You sure as hell can't do that if you're stoned. If you can't get to the churches that hand out food and clothes, or to those little odd jobs, you'll die."



Chronicle / Brant Ward  
Vicki Brewer (left) and her boyfriend, Steve, relax in their creekside tent home, which even features a television that runs off an old car battery. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward



Chronicle / Brant Ward

Vicki Brewer and Patrick Verquitas enjoy each other's company as the sun sets near their homeless encampment along the creek. Many dogs also call the tent city of about 50 people home. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

It was a scorching August day, and everything was quiet near the main camp -- five large tent complexes set around the kitchen, which consisted of 30 square feet of carpet packed with chairs, crates of pots and pans, boxes of canned food, and two gas camp stoves. Some tents were on wooden platforms, some clamped together with metal clips to form a bigger living space. A dozen dogs milled in and out of the doorways.

About 20 feet away on the creek bank, Mike Russell suddenly let out a whoop as he pulled a burlap sack out of the water with a rope. In it were eight crawdads lured in by rotten chicken chunks.

"We're having stew tonight!" Russell, 40, yelled. He hauled the sack over to the dining room. Vicky Brewer, 41, poked her head out of her tent and smiled. "I love crawdads," she said, then ducked back inside to watch TV. Hers was the most elaborate residence in The Colony -- three tents pitched back-to-back and divided into a bathroom, living room, bedroom and entry foyer.

Brewer's TV, like many others, was powered by a car battery she recharges by periodically plugging into any accessible power outlet she can find in town. Her bathroom -- a rare luxury -- had a portable toilet and a small bathtub, both with pipes dribbling wastewater into the pond.

Everything was pin-neat, with clean rugs underfoot and dressers and other furniture making it look like a low-ceilinged trailer home with soft sides.

"It's hell to keep clean, but I just sweep it out every few hours," Brewer said while "The Simpsons" blared on the tube. "You have to have some pride, after all. It is home."



Chronicle / Brant Ward

One of the beavers of Ledgewood Creek carries building materials to his lodge to patch a hole. Homeless residents say the beavers quickly remodel anytime a dam breach appears. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

---

Not in the minds of city, county and police officials it isn't.

They say they would like nothing better than to see those who squat in The Colony move into housing and counseling services -- but they can't find a way to make that happen. The same goes for the several hundred other homeless people who drift around Fairfield and sleep out of sight in bushes around downtown landmarks or empty fields on the edges of the city. Like the beaver pond.

Officials blame the homeless for not taking the hand extended to them by shelters and social service offices. But they also acknowledge they don't offer enough.

"Solano County has the fewest services for the homeless in all of the Bay Area," said Ron Marlette, executive director of Mission Solano in Fairfield, the only shelter and drop-in center in the area for the chronically homeless. "And we have a huge need -- the homeless are all over the place, but hidden because the community is much more intolerant of them than, say, San Francisco.

"They're in our gullies, our streambeds and our parklands, because there's not enough resource for them."



Chronicle / Brant Ward, File

A snowy egret sits atop an abandoned shopping cart lying in Ledgewood Creek. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

For instance, Mission Solano's 50 beds for single or married people are always full. The only other such shelter in the county, a similarly size collection of church cots in Vallejo, is also full every night. An aid center on Mare Island offers housing, substance-abuse counseling and job referrals, but it is hard for many homeless people to get there.

"Our homeless people don't want to go cross-county to some service anyway, since they tend to have grown up in the communities they are in, and they stick to those areas," said Davis, director of the safety net consortium. "So that's where we need to serve them -- locally, with a big emphasis on housing and job services.

"They're not lying on the street corner with a bottle in a bag. You can't really tell they're homeless. I suppose it's a bit strange. But that's what we have."

Fairfield's Redevelopment Agency has built more than 1,300 housing units priced at below-market rates in the past decade, but only 307 of them were aimed at "very-low income" residents -- who are not necessarily homeless. There is little on hand to route homeless individuals into housing, and the \$296-a-month welfare checks run out after three months.



Chronicle / Brant Ward

Shopping carts represent just a portion of the large amounts of trash that have collected around some of the abandoned homeless encampments in suburban Solano County near Fairfield. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

By contrast, in San Francisco and increasing numbers of other cities across the nation, scores of counselors and police are dispatched together to coax the homeless inside. San Francisco has created 1,592 units of supportive housing -- complexes with counselors on site -- for the homeless, contributing mightily to the street population plummeting 28 percent over the past year to 6,248.

Not far behind are Santa Clara, Contra Costa and Alameda counties, which also have indigent populations of about 6,000 apiece. They, like San Francisco, have written 10-year plans to end chronic homelessness, slashed welfare checks, and used the money to build supportive housing.

Solano County -- whose 4,000 homeless people give it the fifth-biggest street population in the Bay Area -- hopes to have a 10-year plan by next year.

"Part of what's going on out there in Solano, the reason it has such great needs, is the geography," said Jessica Flintost of the statewide policy organization HomeBase. "It's much more open, rural, than most counties. It's a tough situation."

Nowhere is Solano's homeless problem more pronounced than in 105,000-population Fairfield -- ironically one of the hottest, fastest-growing bedroom communities in the Bay Area.

Here, the median house price is \$321,130 -- half that of the Bay Area overall -- and downtown, mom-and-pop stores and cafes exude a cozy, old-timey feel free of panhandlers. So many Fairfield residents are shocked to hear they live among hundreds of street people.

Exhibit A is The Colony.

Its encampment at the beaver pond is the only instance in Northern California where animals live so intimately with the homeless, according to HomeBase and other homelessness organizations.

---

Aside from a good instinct for hideaways, the colonists say the key to survival is dependable wheels -- not just for getting to and from town, but also for escaping police sweeps.

That's why most ride bicycles cobbled together from scrounged parts, often dragging improvised carts loaded with supplies pulled from garbage cans or church giveaways.

"This is my circle of craziness, keeps me sane," Verquitas said one chilly afternoon in September, standing among his bike parts and twisting a wrench on the axle of his latest cart, a child's sleigh rigged with wheelchair wheels. "I like to live outdoors and I like to make things, so this is all I need."

Verquitas usually has at least three bicycles and a 6-foot-wide mound of extra wheels, gears and frames -- all gleaned from Dumpsters. He never knows when the police might sweep in and clear most of it away.

Like they did on Oct. 4.

Two sheriff's deputies and a cleanup crew of a half-dozen county prisoners descended upon The Colony that day and hauled out 90 square yards of rubbish. They'd warned the campers the night before that the raid was coming, so most grabbed a few essentials, biked out of sight and waited for the hubbub to die down.

An hour after the crew left at lunchtime, Verquitas and the others pegged down tents in a new spot, reckoning the rousting was done for the next few months.

"The homeless say we don't give them enough, but the key word there is 'give,' " said Deputy Sheriff Ken Kramer, head of the cleanup crew, before driving away. "We offer them help at Mission Solano. They can get welfare. But they just don't take it."

---

Local leaders say big changes in the homeless' woeful situation are on the horizon -- primarily with a huge new project called the Bridge to Life Center, a 154-unit supportive housing complex for homeless people, coupled with general counseling services. Marlette has tapped the city and private donors for most of the \$7.7 million he needs to build it, and hopes to break ground next year and be done by 2009.

"I have never been more excited than I am right now," he said. "This new building will change everything. We'll set it up so that even the most broken crack addict can come in to our place and get all the detox, job or mental counseling and housing placement he needs to become successful.

"You come look at us a few years from now, and you'll see an entirely different county."

Solano County also is finishing its most ambitious count of homeless people this fall, Davis said, and with the data she hopes to pinpoint the greatest needs so resources can be better directed. The process of creating a 10-year plan also is spurring much-needed involvement.

"There are church groups and individuals who want to help, and we are going to put them to work," Davis said. "It will just take a bit more planning."

In the meantime, the lack of services sits just fine with "Wings" Valencia and her Colony pals.

"The less they do, the more they will leave us alone," she said. "I've tried to get help before, housing and stuff like that, but I've given up on them. If they come up with a real place for me to live, a real program -- great."

She was sitting on the bank of the beaver pond as the sun began to sink, watching the tule reeds waving gently in the breeze.

"Until then, I'm here," she sighed.

---

*E-mail Kevin Fagan at [kfagan@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:kfagan@sfgchronicle.com).*