

# Living on the other side of the tracks

Bryan Betts, Alamogordo 6:14 p.m. MT June 20, 2015



(Photo: Bryan Betts &#8212; Daily News)

Editors note: This is part one of a two part series on the homeless in Alamogordo.

For those who sleep in tents and makeshift shelters on the other side of Alamogordo's train tracks, near undeveloped real estate marketed on prominent billboards as "Acres of Opportunity," the daily effort to survive doesn't always play out in full view of the rest of the city.

On a weekday shortly before Easter, long-eared jackrabbits darted out from the brush on the way to one of the spots in the desert where 61-year-old Jimbo, who declined to give his last name, sometimes stays at night. A crate open on one side and long enough for him to spread out his blankets, bedrolls and a sleeping bag provided the Iowa native with a degree of protection against the elements, though a gap between the roof and

walls left him exposed to leaks when it rains.

Jimbo said he occasionally does yard work but hasn't held down a full-time job since he arrived in Alamogordo in 2009, instead begging to earn a little money and eating at food kitchens.

During his years in the city, he said, he's had children tear up his tent and known of homeless individuals stabbed on street corners. Friends with nicknames like Double Barrel and Critter — "real tramps" he called them — have died. He can all but name the day that he kicked a 30-year drinking habit after he "found the Man one night."

"You go out in the desert and make what you can out here," he said. "Like I said, I don't have many possessions. I try and sleep wherever, different places. It's hard to get water out here. It's survival, but it's barely survival."

Interviews with homeless individuals and the local agencies that serve them make clear that Jimbo is far from the only Alamogordo resident without a fixed address. Together they make up an often invisible population that includes not only the chronically homeless but also couch-surfers and van-dwellers, victims of domestic violence and wounded veterans.

Though accurately counting the number of homeless can be difficult, the leaders of local nonprofit organizations like Love Inc. and the Otero County Hunger Coalition said they work with individuals living on Alamogordo's streets often enough to view homelessness as a serious problem, even a crisis, in a city without a designated place for the homeless to stay.

Rev. Kris King, who runs a day shelter called the [House of Prayer](http://www.kriskingministries.org/the-homeless.html) (<http://www.kriskingministries.org/the-homeless.html>), said 17 years working with the chronically homeless in Alamogordo has shown her that the situation goes beyond the individuals motorists see holding cardboard signs around town.

"When people see people on the corner, that's just the tip of the iceberg," King said. "There's a whole lot more that you'll never see on the corners."

## Desert Dwellers

Frank Trevizo, 59, said he's lived in Alamogordo off and on since he was three-years-old — at times in a house, for one six month period in the county jail.

But he's called the desert home for about nine years now, he said, the last five of which he's lived in what looks like a run-down shed a stone's throw from where Jimbo stays.

Trevizo, with one hand on his shelter for balance, said he's been homeless since he got divorced in the 1970s, spending years as an alcoholic and "a troublemaker to the max" before eventually sobering up. A back injury sustained when a truck hit him while he was living in Denver causes him to stagger when he walks.

A family member who lives in town, Trevizo said, will take him to get a shower at the truck stop on North White Sands Boulevard.

The retired owner of a local fast food joint lets him get free coffee and meals, though he has to be careful when crossing the tracks to avoid getting ticketed for trespassing.

"I've been hanging out alright," Trevizo said as he watching a train approach from the north. "I've been doing OK, staying out of trouble."

He said another homeless person once stole a radio, pocket knife and black trash bag full of clothes from his shelter. Now he and Jimbo, who said he's only ever had a 68 cent soda stolen, watch each other's respective areas for unwelcome visitors — rattlesnakes included.

Trevizo said about five guys used to live beneath the trees by the old landfill before the search for the Atari cartridges got them kicked out. Jimbo said some of those who sleep in tents will travel as far north as Colorado during the summer months to avoid the heat, migrating back toward Alamogordo when the weather cools down again.

King said she's known hundreds of homeless people who have come through Alamogordo over the years, pitching tents in the desert or occupying boarded up buildings without utilities, some only for a short time, others for years.

She said Alamogordo's homeless have their own names for landmarks around where they stay, like "World Trade Center" for a pile of bricks that use to be a building.

"Oh, I'm just about a hundred feet away from the World Trade Center near the two trees," King said emulating a homeless person. "And that's their address."

The House of Prayer allows those without an actual postal address to receive mail and store important personal documents at the day shelter, she said, which can help those still physically and mentally able to work apply for jobs. In other cases finding employment takes a back seat to navigating the more serious challenges of homelessness, some of which are life threatening.

King said she once had to identify the body of a man who drowned when a flash flood washed through the arroyo where he was sleeping. Another man who went by the name Cajun, she said, died after he came down with pneumonia and decided to take his oxygen tank out with him in the desert. She said in past years a homeless man in his 20s was killed over a drug-related dispute out in one of the canyons and another man died when he was struck by a car in the street.

"It's a hard lifestyle, and most of them who are chronic out there die young," King said. "Most of them will die before the age of 60. It's a very hard life."

#### **Flying a Sign**

After 12 years in the U.S. Army took him around the world, Daniel Delarosa, 58, said he returned to his hometown of Alamogordo, where earlier this month he sat on a First Street bench with a cardboard sign identifying him as a homeless veteran.

An American flag T-shirt and Texas Longhorns cap provided Delarosa with some protection from the midday sun, though his complexion suggested extensive UV exposure. He said he's been homeless for about 16 years now, counting himself among those living in the desert, but doesn't want to leave town to stay at a shelter somewhere else.

"You know we need their help," Delarosa said. "They don't want to create a shelter like they have in Las Cruces. They have a shelter, but I don't like Las Cruces. I like it here."

Two years ago, he said, he suffered serious injuries after a woman stabbed him multiple times. District Court records show that medical helicopters transported Delarosa to El Paso due to stab wounds to his chest and back allegedly inflicted with an eight or nine inch knife.

Thomas LeBlanc, 58, who said he fought in Vietnam with the Navy and later spent 12 years in prison, accompanied Delarosa on the roadside bench near Walmart. He waved at passersby with an injured right hand, scars marking where he said he had parts of his fingers blown off, and wished motorists a "happy late momma's day."

A Louisiana native and homeless since 1995, LeBlanc said he came through Alamogordo and stayed because he liked being near the mountains. He said injuries sustained in combat and back in the states have left him "semi-physically able" and struggling to find work. Instead, he panhandles and carves artistic designs into sticks, like one resting at his side which he said he's working on for another disabled man.

LeBlanc said he's open to those who would lend him a hand to sober up, get a driver's license and find work as a handyman. But he expressed cynicism about receiving assistance from charities, which he believes help themselves before helping others.

"I can't get over this hump because I stay out here all day and might make \$8 or \$10 some days. I can't live like that," he said. "I finally hit the bottom, and it looks like I'm stuck here."

#### **The Uncounted**

Statistics on Alamogordo's homeless population can be hard to come by, presenting a challenge for understanding the scope of the problem.

Hank Hughes serves as the executive director of the [New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness \(http://nmceh.org/\)](http://nmceh.org/), a group of organizations across the state that coordinate their efforts to assess and help the homeless. A point in time count taken earlier this year, Hughes said, recorded about 2,800 homeless persons throughout the state, though the coalition considers the number an under count because of its inability to find everyone in a single day or even a week.

He said in Alamogordo the NMCEH only counted those individuals currently staying at the [Center of Protective Environment \(http://www.copedv.org/\)](http://www.copedv.org/), which runs a nine bedroom shelter for victims of domestic violence, and not those living in the desert or other parts of the city. COPE Executive Director Kay Gomolok said the shelter houses at least 200 people, both individuals and families, in a year's time.

The Alamogordo Police Department's logs provide another record of homelessness in the city, though one that only includes homeless individuals charged with a crime.

During the approximately six month period from Nov. 29 to May 21, Alamogordo Police Department officers responded to 43 calls that resulted in the ticketing or arrest of individuals who claimed to be homeless, according to Alamogordo police logs. APD spokeswoman Lt. Tracy Corbett said officers may count as homeless those who don't have a consistent address, whether they live in the desert or move between residences.

Counting repeat offenders, those numbers include 33 distinct individuals, 24 men and 9 women, averaging about 36.5 years old. Most were charged with misdemeanor offenses for trespassing and shoplifting, many others arrested on warrants for failure to appear or failure to pay, and a few picked up felony charges like burglary and aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.

The police logs show that those calls led to jail time on 37 occasions, with one 51-year-old woman going to jail four times in less than two months for trespassing, shoplifting and possession of drug paraphernalia. NMCEH Executive Director Hughes said it's common for the homeless to take up a disproportionate amount of the time and resources of police, fire and emergency services.

[Otero County Hunger Coalition \(http://www.oterohungers.org/\)](http://www.oterohungers.org/) Councilwoman Janet Quick said she'd estimate that Alamogordo has 50 or more homeless people in different situations, from those sleeping under bridges to the "handful" of individuals she knows to be living in their cars.

[Love Inc. \(http://www.loveincotero.org/\)](http://www.loveincotero.org/) Executive Director Susan Payne said her organization, which runs a food pantry and other programs for the poor in Otero County, receives several hundred calls for homeless families each year, though not all those families turn out to be homeless once they've had the chance to explain their situation. Still, Payne said Love Inc. spent around \$10,000 of its budget in 2013 to provide hotel rooms for those who needed a place to stay, most of whom were homeless, temporarily homeless or on the verge of losing their home.

Payne gave the example of a woman Love Inc. put up in a hotel room for four days earlier this year after police officers observed her on the street attempting to open a can of food with a knife. She said she ended up having to turn the woman back out on the street when the state couldn't help her and Love Inc. couldn't continue supporting her.

"I guess if the police find her dead in the ditch somewhere that will solve everybody's problem," she said, calling the hotel rooms a "band aid" solution to an issue that's overlooked or denied. "And yes, that's on the record because that's genuinely how I feel sometimes. It's very frustrating to me that we have this problem."

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