Lee County's homeless have no home to shelter in from COVID-19, feel pushed to keep moving (Michael Braun, News-Press, April 20)

- For some homeless people in Lee County, an already threadbare safety net seems to be more frayed.

While the novel coronavirus has permeated all social strata, many of the area's homeless people say they feel singled out by police and pushed from place to place, never being allowed to stay anywhere public for long.

Recent videos show homeless people in Fort Myers being wakened by police or being asked to leave downtown locations.

People such as Ramona Miller, who runs the nonprofit A Voice In the Wilderness Empowerment Center, and Fort Myers state Rep. Heather Fitzenhagen (R-Fort Myers) know this all too well and are trying to do something about it.

Since early March when COVID-19 turned everything upside down, Miller has been doling out dinner for up to 70 homeless people in and around City of Palms Park.

"A lot of them were hungry," said Miller, who is also a Southwest Florida regional expert in sex trafficking rescue and street outreach. On Thursday she passed out a warm meal of chicken and noodles, hot sauce, water, blankets, and some clothing items to those gathered.

On Thursday night the homeless men and women Miller is trying to help drift in dribs and drabs into the grassy parking area to the east of City of Palms Park anticipating a meal.

Those who aren't sated by the offering politely wait until everyone has eaten before approaching Miller for seconds.

She spends from $200 to $250 a day, some of it coming from donations, to feed those who need it.

"Look at these people," Miller said, pointing to slowly fluctuating gatherings of homeless people sitting under the trees off Lafayette Street. "These are homeless people. This isn't even a dent. Where will these people go? They have to disperse."

Miller said that not all of those seeking help are actually without homes but she expects that before the pandemic has run its course both physically and economically, there will be more in that position.

How does someone without a home shelter at one?
That's the issue Miller stresses homeless people here are having as they get pushed from public places by police. She said they have been told if they stay at the grassy parking areas on either side of City of Palms they will be "trespassed" by police.

Fitzenhagen said she has been trying to figure out a solution after she heard about what has been termed as "confrontations" between police and the homeless.

"It's really unbelievable to me," the state representative said. "They have nowhere to go. It's just inhumane to ignore them."

Fitzenhagen, who's running for Congress, lauded Miller's efforts and those of other area homeless advocates and said she has offered Miller some funds to help distribute food.

There is so much more wrong though, she said.

"The homeless aren't social distancing," she said. "They stand close together to get food. They have no way to keep clean or wash their hands. I'm talking basics. It's just abominable."

Miller said she urges the people she helps to adhere to social distancing mandates, to little avail.

"I've tried," she said. "They say 'but we live together'."

Fitzenhagen said she has tried talking with area churches to see if they had property that could be used but liability issues became a problem. Ditto for looking for private property solutions.

"The parks are closed," Fitzenhagen added. "They've been told to get out of the library. And now the library is closed. I'm not giving up," she said. "If they get the virus it will spread like wildfire."

She said many of the lifelines that homeless people usually use, such as social assistance networks, are closed because of the pandemic.

In response to a query about police contact with homeless people, Kristin Capuzzi, public information officer for the Fort Myers Police Department, said that for the past two weeks, outreach to the homeless population has been conducted though distributing prevention information at food distribution sites throughout the city, with materials printed in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Other resources are available on the city and county COVID-19 websites, she said.

"The on-the-ground outreach campaign is being conducted in an attempt to reach populations that might not otherwise see our messaging on social media and traditional media channels," Capuzzi said in an email to The News-Press. "Prevention messaging has also been delivered through variable message boards and billboards in high-visibility areas."

She added that as a part of the response to COVID-19, Fort Myers, Lee County and the Lee County Homeless Coalition said they are partnering on a number of homeless outreach initiatives such as portable
restrooms with wet wash or hand sanitizer dispensers coming soon to Lions Park, the parking lot of The Salvation Army off Edison Avenue and Billy Bowlegs Park.

Betsy Clayton, communications director for Lee County Government, said the county's Human & Veteran Services Department along with the Lee County Homeless Coalition and City of Fort Myers have been working collaboratively to provide continued services to the homeless population during the pandemic.

"Look at what it took," Miller said of the local government response. "Why wasn't this prepared?"

Miller said the response is too little, too late and that homeless people usually have no viable alternatives to finding whatever safe place they can scrounge, be it woods, abandoned buildings, a brush-filled area.

"They have to roam," she said. "Even if they are moving they can still get busted for what police call 'prowling'."

Miller said the police started issuing homeless people trespass warnings to deter them from hanging around local businesses during the pandemic.

Those who gathered for Miller's meals Thursday concurred.

Shelby Woods, 27, said she is a native Floridian who had at times spent her night around the public library downtown.

"I've never been trespassed yet," she said, but knows others who are on a regular basis.

"Everything is shut down and then they trespass you" she said. "And they release you the next day."

Jay Francis Burns, a homeless man also known as Rambo, has 17 citations for trespassing in Lee County since May 2018. Ten of those were issued by the Lee County Sheriff's Office and seven from Fort Myers police. Some involved jail time and fines of more than $450.

"I've been trespassed from the laundromat and from the Racetrack (gas station)," he said.

Burns, 50, also said he has had his belongings taken, destroyed and had tents and shelter items slashed with a knife or sprayed with a foul-smelling substance like MACE.

Late Thursday, Miller said a group of homeless people who had been sitting outside the closed library building downtown were approached by Fort Myers police and told to move along. A video on YouTube showed an earlier, similar police-homeless interaction.

Miller added that if the person doesn't get a $125 trespassing citation then they'll usually get a notice to appear for court at a later date.

"They tell them to just go into the woods," she said the homeless people she serves tell her. "But, it's mostly private property."
FMPD's Capuzzi said the library has removed all benches and tables to cease any congregation.

"We understand that there is Wi-Fi available daily for all," she said. "The same rules apply at the library. We have not 'just recently' decided to enforce this as some outlets have implied.

She added that homeless people will no longer be asked to move along from some city-owned areas.

"We will patrol to be sure they are cleaning up excessive trash," she said. "We are only enforcing on issues such as businesses and certain circumstances that require such. However we do use discretion and again empathize with our homeless population."

Austin Pichardo, a homeless man who was talking with fellow homeless people at the downtown library Sunday morning, said for the past two days police have not rousted anyone from the grounds.

"They've been taking shifts," Pichardo said. "Six to eight hours. But they haven't trespassed anyone."

While he was talking, in Cordog Plaza next to the library, two FMPD cruisers sat within view on Richmond Street behind the library.

Francis Covati, 58, a homeless man who has multiple citations and arrests for trespassing in Lee County — the last time on April 4 — said when he's told to leave he usually tries to find a hidden place and not make a mess.

"I could stay at the public park," he said. "But the police pulled in and pushed us out."

Videos provided by Miller and others several days ago show Fort Myers police officers telling homeless people they have to leave the downtown library and directing them away from City of Palms Park.

One video shows an FMPD cruiser at the stadium property Wednesday with an officer turning on a siren and saying over a loudspeaker "Good morning. It's time to wake up. Hello, hello, hello."

The officer directs everyone to leave, reminds them to clean up, and then drives off. Several of the homeless people at the park showed trespassing citations issued by the police.

Miller said she has resorted to renting hotel rooms to let some of the homeless at least get showers and clean up.

She is hoping to be able to have homeless, supporters and others to come to the Lee County commission meeting Tuesday to talk about the problems with commissioners.

Miller and other advocates are passing out flyers to the homeless and others urging them to attend the 9:30 a.m. meeting in the board's chambers in the old Lee County Courthouse.

Clayton said the public can come to the commission meeting and that seats in chambers are labeled for social distancing concerns and board members are also socially distanced.
She added that public participation is also available via e-comments.

"I wish they would be honest and have concern for our fellow human beings," Miller said. "People in power can't relate to the homeless."

The City of Palms homeless group said up until now, if it wasn't for Miller, they wouldn't even have the small meal, information and possibly the hand sanitizer they do have.

Tommy Williams, a homeless man known as "T.C.", said Miller has made a huge difference.

"She was there when a lot of people weren't there for us," he said.

Connect with breaking news reporter Michael Braun: MichaelBraunNP (Facebook), @MichaelBraunNP (Twitter) or mbraun@news-press.com. News-Press reporter Kaitlin Greenockle contributed to this article.

In case you missed it: Nonprofits struggle to find their footing in ongoing coronavirus crisis

And: Naples, Fort Myers philanthropic first responders work to help keep nonprofits afloat during coronavirus crisis

Some help in Fort Myers

The City of Fort Myers is providing the following help for homeless people:

- Portable restroom units with wet wash or hand-sanitizer dispensers are being delivered to Lions Park, the parking lot of The Salvation Army off Edison Ave and Billy Bowlegs Park. Each site will have two portables. As of now, these are scheduled for cleaning and maintenance two times a week. A fourth location is being confirmed.

- A new laundry initiative is being launched Monday. A laundromat in Fort Myers with two locations will receive, wash, dry and package up to 20 pounds of laundry from homeless clientele. An outreach team will distribute vouchers over the next few days.

- Fifty outreach bags have been delivered for distribution to those experiencing homelessness containing the following items: Washcloth, toothbrush and toothpaste, mosquito repellent, deodorant, 30 SPF suntan lotion, spoon/fork combo, Wet Ones wipes, flashlight, pair of socks, Chapstick, antibiotic ointment.

- In addition, 30-40 tarps will be distributed along with printed flyers with information regarding food access sites.