

# Food Brings Hope to Homeless Students

By Dan Harkins, Hometown News

Some Volusia County students sleep on the floor at a relative's house. Others move from one friend's couch to another, from one school to the next. They're among the more than 1,600 homeless students in Volusia County.

"It is total instability," said Daytona Beach City Commissioner Pam Woods, whose day job is homeless liaison for Volusia County Schools. "(Housing and Urban Development) doesn't look at that as homelessness, but we do."

While the number of homeless in Volusia County was estimated at 2,400 last year, an additional 1,656 were homeless students, Ms. Woods said. Many are in the family car or a tent, with parents wary of asking for help.



School attendance figures are dropping but not the number of homeless students.

"They don't want anybody to know that's where they've ended up because they're afraid (a case worker) is going to take their kids away," she said.

Help is spreading fast, though.

Since 2007, Ms. Woods has worked closely with a Daytona Beach nonprofit called Food Brings Hope to provide these children with the essentials they'll need to survive. The program brings together homeless students with caring adults, homeless support organizations and their peers.

After school once a week, Food Brings Hope clubs meet so homeless students can receive tutoring, socialize and eat dinner. Weekends, they attend cultural events and continue to bond as a second family.

Food Brings Hope director Beth Butera said the group's events are bittersweet.

"People in the community just have no idea that it's like that out there," she said. "We just want to get a hold of them and lift them up."

Food Brings Hope started with a heartbreaking observation by founder Forough Hosseini, senior vice president for ICI Homes in Daytona Beach.

Her daughter, Nina, was in fourth grade in 2005 when one of her classmates lost her mobile home in a storm. She was living with a sibling and their grandmother.

Around the same time, the school's FCAT exams were administered, she recalled, and her daughter scored highest in her class. In second place: the little girl who lost her home.

Ms. Hosseini sent a construction crew to fix the home, but it was beyond repair, so she moved the grandmother and her grandchildren into an apartment and helped the woman find a job.

About six months later, she learned the grandmother was a drug dealer.

"It was so sad," she said. "When you give money and it goes to drugs or alcohol. I thought, how can we help kids when, in these cases, it involved problems that were created by their parents."

That's when she paired with Ms. Woods. The first program was at Hinson Middle School in 2007, with 26 homeless students, ending the year with 17.

"Those kids are graduating from high school this year," Ms. Hosseini said. "Now, we're helping them with getting into college and scholarships."

At Osceola Elementary School in Ormond Beach, where busing was first provided, the group went from 25 to 75 members immediately.

"I believe in the adage that charity begins at home," Ms. Hosseini said. "And when I look in my own hometown and see kids who are homeless, kids who literally go home hungry, I have trouble sending my money to Africa."

Until this year, the group had clubs in seven schools in East Volusia. A few months ago, it started its first club in west Volusia County at Deltona High School.

The club started with 11 members, said Deltona High School principal Susan Freeman, but is currently down to seven, since some members couldn't attend due to work or family obligations. She's hoping to double or even triple the membership, though, as recent counts show the school officially has 26 homeless students.

"It's heartbreaking to know kids who are faced with these types of things," Ms. Freeman said, "but it's rewarding to know there are organizations out there that will contribute to helping them feel good about themselves and give them opportunities to experience some things that they normally wouldn't be able to do."

Deltona High's Food Brings Hope club recently attended an Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University basketball game. Westside Elementary School's club toured the Halifax Historical Museum in Daytona Beach.

Other schools without Food Brings Hope clubs are starting to help in other ways.

University High School in Orange City has at least half of its student body on free or reduced lunch and the highest number of homeless high school students in the county: 53.

Even though the school has yet to start a Food Brings Hope club, Stephanie Owens, who monitors progress for the school's exceptional students, just started a food pantry near the school's bus circle.

With help from Food Brings Hope and Halifax Urban Ministries, the pantry will provide a 40-lb. bag of food to needy students every Friday afternoon.

Ms. Owens said teachers everywhere are used to being part-time social workers. Arrangements such as this will help to streamline those efforts.

Students will tell her about their needs and she then feels she has to "find a way to make them have what they're missing," Ms. Owens said.

Jim Tager brought the Food Brings Hope program with him two years ago when he went from principal at New Smyrna Beach Middle School to the high school.

He called it "invaluable."

"It gives these students a sense of belonging," he said. "On a middle school or high school campus, everybody has to have somebody they can relate to positively."

For more information, contact Food Brings Hope at [beth@foodbringshope.org](mailto:beth@foodbringshope.org) or call (386) 366-9059.