

## UMB Students Participate in Baltimore Census Count

Contributed by Lori Romer

The late January morning started out on a bitterly cold note, even for a winter day in Maryland. Temperatures in the early morning hours hovered in the teens, and a light snow kept the chill in the air. But nothing could stop the 50 students from the University of Maryland, Baltimore from heading out to start the 2007 Baltimore Homeless Census.

The survey is taken every two years on the same day in cities across the country and is federally mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. One of the goals of the count is to provide insight into why homelessness occurs and generate ideas on how to end it.

According to the Homeless Services Unit, a division of the city health department that organizes the census, an estimated 7,000 people in the city are homeless at some point during the year.

"Every day on the walk to school, I see people who need help," says Ben Peoples, a student at the School of Law. "With this census, we're getting the tools to be able to determine their needs and design programs and benefits that will help them."

"It's a hard group to reach out and identify their needs," says Adam Schneider, a student at the School of Social Work and a community relations associate at Health Care for the Homeless. "The root cause of homelessness is lack of affordable housing, health care, and job training."

Working in teams of three, volunteers counted people in public areas, shelters, missions, and soup kitchens throughout Baltimore City. But beyond just the raw numbers collected, a three-page survey completed by each person will help paint a picture of homelessness in the city.

"The students asked questions to get additional data," explains Bob Kirk, MSW, LCSW-C, clinical instructor at the School of Social Work. "Why are you homeless? What services do you need? When was the last time you were housed? Which programs worked and which ones didn't? With these answers, we can try to figure out a way to end homelessness."

For Teri Rich, a joint degree student at the Schools of Law and Social Work, being on the ground floor of an effort like this is a different way of looking at homelessness. "I rarely get to participate in the research end of things," she says. "In social work, we're much more involved in the direct participation of services for the homeless population. Projects like this that take a count of people and look at what needs are important are very valuable."

Organizers say the census data will be used when people apply for grants and federal funding for programs for the homeless. City health officials are in the process of writing a 10-year plan to end homelessness in the city.

"It's important as part of the community to see the bigger picture and to get faculty, staff, and students involved in pro bono work," says Teresa Schmiedeler, JD, director of Pro Bono Public Service Initiatives at the School of Law. "What's exciting about this is that we have a partnership with all the schools across campus. Students from all seven schools are here working on this project."

Lori Romer is a media relations specialist at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. She is a graduate of the University of Maryland School of Law and worked for the past eight years as a television news producer in Baltimore and Washington, DC.