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## Coalition helps homeless acquire identification

By PATRICIO G. BALONA  
Staff writer

DELAND -- Samuel Thomas guards his Florida identification card as if it were gold.

The 44-year-old homeless man has good reason to keep a close eye on the laminated card with a magnetic strip and photo. Eight years ago, DeLand police stopped him because they thought he robbed a convenience store and the ID card saved him from taking a trip to jail.

Thomas is one of the lucky few who possess an ID card. Of the more than 5,000 homeless people in Volusia and Flagler counties, many are without, said Tony Schefstad, executive director of the Volusia/Flagler County Coalition for the Homeless.

The coalition is raising money to start a program to help homeless people get IDs. The agency is accepting help from corporations and businesses or individuals willing to sponsor ID cards, Schefstad said.

Programs that provide assistance to the homeless said identification became a priority after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"In a post 9/11 time, it has become more and more important to identify who you are to get services," Schefstad said.

The coalition is working with IDignity, an Orlando faith-based group, to get homeless people Florida ID cards, birth certificates and Social Security cards, Schefstad said.

A group of five churches started IDignity to provide the basic need of identification to the very poor and homeless, said Carolyn Wilson, co-chairwoman of the IDignity West Volusia Implementation.

"This is an effort to get IDs for them either because they can't afford it or can't work their way through the system," she said.

IDignity, through events, provides identification cards with the help and advice of attorneys, the nonprofit's Web site states.

Schefstad said the project will enable homeless people to become self-sufficient because the documents will give them a chance to get jobs, services or get Social Security benefits.

Randy Wright, 53, who has been homeless for almost three years, said he believes the program is a good one. Wright lost his driver's license but replaced it with his sister's help.

"IDs are a priority when you are homeless," Wright said. "Officers in DeLand stop you all the time and they want to see an ID."

The Coalition for the Homeless plans to hold its first event in March and will be hosted at First Presbyterian Church on Woodland Boulevard. It will bring together the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, Florida Vital Statistics department, Social Security Administration and other services to help the homeless get identification.

Depending on the success of the first event, the program will expand to the Daytona Beach area and Flagler County, Schefstad said.

Homeless people usually carry everything they own on their backs when they move from place to place. In the process, they lose their documents. And when they are beaten, robbed or arrested, they often never see their belongings again, said Roni Grasseler of AGAPE Clubhouse at First United Methodist Church in DeLand.

The event will be a big help since smaller organizations that work with the homeless can no longer afford to pay for the cards to give homeless people. For many years, the AGAPE Clubhouse paid for identification for the homeless but increased charges have made it impossible to continue, Grasseler said.

"There is a lot of need for it," Grasseler said. "An ID is needed even to get a health care card. An ID is needed for everything."

Thomas agreed. He is convinced that when DeLand police stopped him in 2001, he would have been hauled to jail had he not been able to produce an identification card.

"They said I fit the description of some guy who robbed a 7-Eleven," Thomas said Wednesday. "But when they saw my ID they realized it was not me and they let me go."

It was a close call for Thomas, who replaced his Florida ID just days before police stopped him. A former restaurant worker, Thomas said he lost his ID card when his wallet fell out of his pocket while sitting on the bleachers at a baseball game.

"Identification is a really big deal," Thomas said. "With it you can prove you are not the one that committed a crime (for which) the police want to catch someone."

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To help sponsor the identification-card program, call Tony Schefstad at

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