

Ringgold, GA: A town with compassion

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By [Tamara Wolk](#) . . . It's probably not often that a group of people ranging from pastors to city and county government, law enforcement, judges, social services, citizens and the homeless gather in one location to try to understand and solve a serious problem together. That's what happened at Ringgold Baptist Church the cold afternoon of Thursday, Nov. 15.

The city of Ringgold has been grappling with the issue of several homeless men living under a bridge. Residents have expressed concerns ranging from the safety of children to problems for nearby businesses, litter and the integrity of the bridge structure because fires were being built under it.

Ringgold City Council passed an "emergency urban camping ordinance" at its Nov. 12 meeting that resulted in deadlines for those living under the bridge to find other accommodations.

By the time of the community gathering of dozens of people at

Ringgold Baptist, only one man remained a resident under the bridge. The group ended up addressing that immediate need and also discussed the greater problem of people returning to society from prison without a social safety net, without financial resources and with a prison record that limits their ability to find housing or work.

A particular problem that was discussed was homeless people who have been sex offenders and are listed on the sex offender registry.

Numerous people took to the microphone to explain the complications of a sex-offender background. Representatives from the Georgia Department of Community Supervision (DCS) spoke and handed out an information sheet that offered statistics and tried to clarify some misunderstandings.

The DCS sheet notes that the "number of supervised sex offenders re-leased from prison to reside in Catoosa County this year has been 23." Nine of those were "immediately homeless after release."

The sheet goes on to say that 88 sex offenders currently live in Catoosa County, two of whom are homeless. Further, says the info sheet, DCS District 7, which includes Catoosa and 13 other counties, has the highest number of supervised sex offenders of all DCS districts in the state, but not a single shelter to help them even on an emergency basis. . . .

A local resident shared the story of his grandson who was convicted of statutory rape when he was 17 years old. The girl he was involved with was 15 and the grandfather said the relationship was consensual. The boy's family spent \$25,000 to keep him out of jail but, says the grandfather, "He had that sex offender tag that made it hard for him to find work or a place to live." The boy, says the grandfather, missed a single meeting with his probation officer and ended up in prison for five years over it.

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