**Hampton, Newport News teens experience homelessness**

**Teens sleep in boxes and eat soup-kitchen fare to experience homelessness**

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HAMPTON — —

As temperatures dipped into the low 40s late Saturday afternoon, 12-year-old Raymond Triggs duct-taped the walls of his house.

"You need a good foundation if there's going to be a blizzard," said the Mary Passage Middle School student, studying the triangular-shaped cardboard tent where he planned to sleep. Bundled up in long johns and four layers of clothes, Triggs said he is prepared to weather the cold — just like any homeless person on the Peninsula.

Triggs and 120 teenagers, who planned to spend the night in a cardboard box village outside the Hampton Youth Center on Saturday, are returning home Sunday morning with better insight on what it's like to be homeless, said Alternatives Inc. spokeswoman Callie Hardman.

The overnight event was the brainchild of Uth ACT, a Hampton-based teen organization that works to raise teenage awareness of social issues and potential solutions.

The students spent the night in the shoes of a homeless person, Hardman said. Besides sleeping in boxes, they dined on soup and bread, clustered around burn barrels to stay warm and participated in activities that included daily challenges faced by the homeless.

According to the Virginia Greater Peninsula Continuum of Care's Task Force on Homelessness, there were 607 homeless people on the Peninsula and approximately 9,000 in Virginia in 2009.

Woodside High School student Jason Maly, who moved from [**Connecticut**](http://www.dailypress.com/topic/us/connecticut-PLGEO100100200000000.topic) in August, has volunteered in soup kitchens. But this event is letting him see homelessness from a different perspective.

"People have to deal with the cold, a lack of money, and a lack of motivation needed to get their lives back on track," Maly said. "When you experience it, you learn more than when you sit in a classroom and listen to someone. We're getting to feel the reality of homelessness."

Bethel High School senior Kaila Warren says the event is makes her more appreciative of amenities many teens take for granted. Also, it's making her question whether Americans, who generously donate to impoverished countries in need, shouldn't invest more resources at home.

"We send so much money to other countries … but we're neglecting homeless people here," she said. "There may be people in our own neighborhoods that are close to being homeless and in need of help.

"This is opening my eyes … to what it feels like not to have the means to take care of yourself," she said. "So many teenagers have cell phones ... and worry about the brand names in our clothes and the cars we drive. I think we forget sometimes that there are people out here without food and shelter."

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