

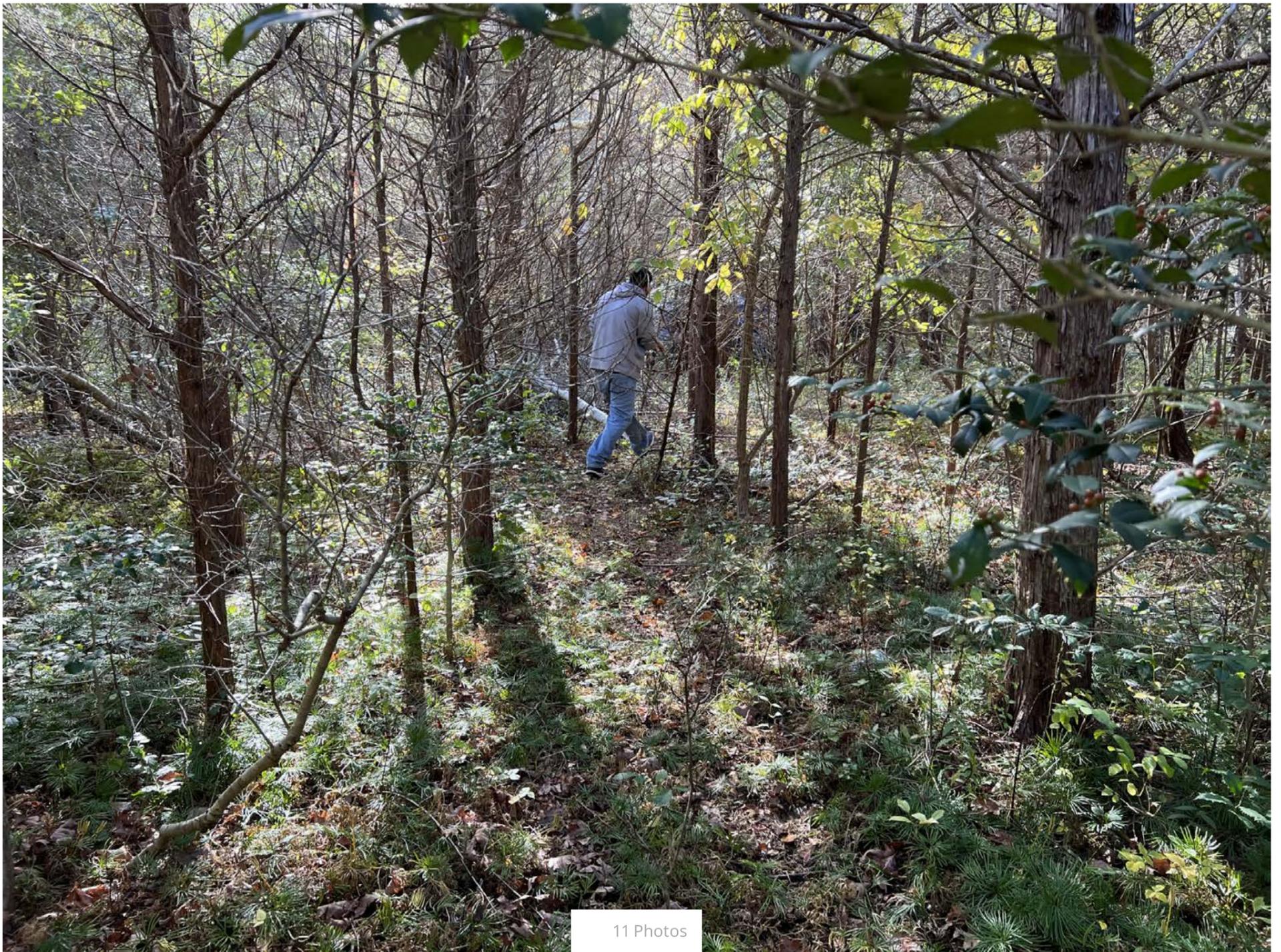


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Homeless, And Hanging Out In Southampton, Outreach Expert Visits Local Woods Offering Aid



Kitty Merrill on Nov 10, 2021

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Church are “the ones living in the woods now.”

For years, the rumors have swirled that the 10-acre forested site located between the church and the Hillcrest Terrace community is the site of homeless encampments.



On Friday, November 5, under clear blue morning skies, Rich Dellasso went to see. The Supportive Services for Veteran Families outreach coordinator for the Economic Opportunity Council of Suffolk, Dellasso spends many days in the woods of Suffolk County searching for people living on the edge of society. His focus is on veterans, but, he said, if he comes across other homeless people, he can refer them to the proper organizations for help.

Entering the property from the dead end at Hillcrest Terrace, a tremendous volume of trash is the first sight confronted. Veined with trails, the woods have been a shortcut to the local beverage store for community members for years, according to Southampton Village Police Lieutenant Chris Wetter.

Beer cans and liquor bottles, scores of them, litter sides of the paths at the outskirts of the parcel, alongside takeout containers and plastic water jugs. “Normally, what I’ve seen, in residential areas, you don’t see people set up. You see them closer to the public highways,” Dellasso explained. Speaking to the massive array of bottles and cans he observed, noting that each one could be worth the deposit, “You would think — five cents ...”

Shoes and Gatorade bottles strew the sides of the path. Deeper in, the first sign of a modest encampment — clothing hanging from trees, more garbage, discarded water jugs. Several yards away, a shelter.

“Make sure you stay behind me,” Dellasso says, approaching the trash-ridden clearing. There’s a closet-sized shelter, a lean to, and surrounding the clearing, clothes hang from tree branches, a dingy sock waves from the elbow of a bush.

Dellasso recalls a shack he visited once at a big camp in Ronkonkoma. The man living there had built it over the course of eight years from things he found. There were three rooms, racks to sleep on, a pot belly stove, and friends. “They had a VCR, they were swigging vodka at 9:30 in the morning,” Dellasso remembered. The man had been homeless for 20 years and preferred life off the grid.

At another site, residents had created a “tile floor” with Corona bottle caps. “Every time they took a cap off the bottle, they dropped it on the ground and pushed it in with their feet,” he recalled.

“Are you okay?” he asks repeatedly and the man nods his head, smiling. Asked if he knows of others living nearby, he motions to the east — “allí.” Dellasso gives him his card. “Si, thank you,” the man says.



“Most times, when I come across encampments, people are very cordial,” Dellasso said. He makes sure to speak gently and assures people that he means no harm and wants to help. Very often, people he meets say they are fine and politely refuse help. “They’re used to a certain way of life,” he said. “You can’t make somebody do something they don’t want to do.”

When he finds encampments that seem to be active, but no one is home, he leaves behind his card. Last year, on a visit to an encampment in Hampton Bays, the ground near a shelter was littered with business cards from support services staff. At another spot in Hampton Bays, he found the occupant of a handmade shack was growing tomatoes.

To the east, the staggering volume of garbage continues alongside the trail, noise from County Road 39 grows louder. A clearing — about 60 feet in diameter — is bordered by a berm of bottles and beer cans. A circle of tamped down mud features a covered barbecue grill on one side. A handful of men sit around a small fire. One is cooking something that looks like a piece of chicken.

Just one of the group appears able to speak English. “We’re not homeless,” he insists when asked. “We don’t live here. We just come here. We live on Windward Way ... in Southampton.”

Trails fan out from the huge clearing like the spokes of a wheel. As Dellasso speaks to the group, a man carrying a case of canned beverages appears on an eastern trail and stops in his tracks. Then, seeing the visitors mean no harm, continues toward his friends.

The scene comports with observations made by the police and neighbors — that day laborers who set up next to the nearby 7-Eleven come over to the woods to hang out if the morning passes without work.

“I think what he said was they went to 7-Eleven and nobody picked them up for work today,” Dellasso said.

There’s what looks like an abandoned encampment toward the western end of the woods. More clothes hanging from limbs, a filthy mattress, empty gallon water bottles, a small container of Tide and a spackle bucket for washing clothes.



Funded by the Veterans Administration, Supportive Services for Veteran Families helps house homeless veterans or those on the verge of homelessness. Originally from Centereach, Dellasso served in the U.S. Army and said he’s grateful for the chance to help other vets through the organization. For those who meet the criteria, the program can provide the first month’s rent and a security deposit for someplace to stay.

In Southampton on Friday, there was no one who met the criteria.

There was, however, a sign the site has been a place for teens and day laborers to hang out, as locals believe, and perhaps a temporary residence for others for many years.

“That goes to show you how long this stretch of land has been used,” Dellasso says, pointing down. At his feet, a 1988 monthly date keeper.

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What’s In A Word?

One word can be worth 1,000 words when omitted by The Press Independent Living,” the title of an organization pushing 60-year-olds on County Road 39, dropping its name when it was changed. It wasn’t merely descriptive, but it set standards of eligibility for low-cost assisted living. The picture shows a row of odds with busy workers joining for local consumption, the title of “Southampton” — and The Press’ absent curiosity, simply revealed. It appeared [“Road Is Cappec”]

by Staff Writer