

Press Release

2016 Yakima County Point in Time Homeless Count For Immediate Release

For more information, comments, or questions please contact:

Larry Mattson, Executive Director of YVCOG.

Larry.Mattson@YVCOG.org

509-574-1550

2016 Yakima County Point in Time Homeless Count

The Point in Time count, also referred to as 'PIT' or simply "the count" is conducted annually throughout Yakima County during the last 10 days of January to estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night in our communities. The local PIT count is part of a nationwide data collection effort required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Data collection for the PIT count comes from two sources: a Sheltered Count covering the homeless population staying in housing of various types that is dedicated to serving the homeless and an Outreach Count that attempts to reach the homeless or at risk wherever they may be located within the community.

The purpose of the Point in Time Survey is to determine the number of homeless individuals living in Yakima County on a given day. The Yakima Valley Conference of Governments is the lead agency in the County for conducting the annual homeless count. YVCOG reviews the results, identifies gaps in housing and services, and works with the Homeless Planning and Policy Committee to develop and update countywide plans to close the gaps.

The total number of unsheltered homeless individuals in our county is certainly higher than what is captured by the Outreach Count due to an avoidance of known locations, mistrust or hesitance regarding service providers and surveyors, unwillingness to respond, and many other factors. While the Count can provide the community with a useful description of our sheltered homeless population, it cannot capture the full picture of our unsheltered homeless.

The Numbers

Overall number of homeless is 580, down 16% over last year and falling below 600 for the first time. The decrease is believed to be related in part to an increase in the number of homeless moving out of shelter programs and into rental housing or permanent supportive housing. In 2016 168 individuals were housed in permanent supportive housing a 10% increase over 2015.

The chronic homeless are the more visible unsheltered homeless in communities and are typically the hardest to serve due to mental health, substance abuse or a physical disability that impacts their ability to gain or maintain stable housing. The number of chronic homeless in Yakima County has remained steady over the past four years with an average of 80 individuals. When asked about the location of

their last permanent housing, 90% reported that it was in Yakima County indicating that the population is not transitory.

The age and disability status of the chronic homeless differ significantly from other homeless sub-populations. The chronic homeless are older in age with 86% over the age of 35. Six reported being over the age of 65 and none were children under the age of 18. As for the prevalence of Permanent Disabling Conditions, 67% reported having a permanent physical disability followed by 31% who reported a mental health disability. Only 18% reported a drug or alcohol disability which is lower than the four year average of 26%.

The highest concentrations of homeless are in the City of Yakima, with over 80% of the homeless population, followed by the Central Valley Communities of Toppenish and Wapato. One factor that contributes to the higher Yakima number is that the City is the largest urban center in the County and has the majority of housing and service resources. A common misperception is that the homeless come from other communities. When asked where they lived before becoming homeless, 93% reported a city within Yakima County. Over the past four years the average rate has been 88%. Another common perception is that persons from out of the area are released from correctional facilities or treatment programs into the community and become homeless. The 7% who reported from being outside the community were also asked if they had been released from an institution such as jail, treatment facility or hospital within the past year, and 74% reported no exits. Over the past four years the average rate has been 69%.

When comparing those who are in shelters or transitional housing to those who are unsheltered, a significant difference in population is presented. Those in shelters are typically families with very young children in contrast to the unsheltered who are older single adults or couples. Children in families make up 38% of the total sheltered count with 4 of the top 5 most frequently reported ages under 5 years. In contrast children do not make up a significant portion of the unsheltered population which was reported at 5%. No unaccompanied youth were surveyed or self-identified.

To compare, Homeless youth data from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction reported 2,153 homeless youth in Yakima County school districts during the 2014-2015 school year, representing an almost 69% increase since the 2010-2011 season. Over 90 % of all homeless youth reported being unstably housed (living doubled up or in motels) and are in families rather than unaccompanied. This would indicate that, many families in Yakima County are in extreme poverty and receiving some form of housing assistance but are not considered literally homeless.

When asked about causes for homelessness, both the sheltered and unsheltered identified the same top four causes as unable to pay rent or mortgage, job loss, family crisis or breakup and alcohol or drug use. Two of the top four causes are directly related to economic issues and poverty (housing affordability and employment) while the other two are related to the impacts of economic stress (substance abuse and broken family relationships).

Other data and Observations

From local outreach workers and case manager interviews and observations, many of the homeless report not having family support systems and often create surrogate families with others who are experiencing homelessness. Pets also create important social connections for those who are homeless, providing companionship and emotional support.

The unsheltered homeless can qualify to receive rental subsidies to move into private rental market housing, but the path to housing has many barriers. Most landlords use common tenant screening

procedures that screen out people with no income, no credit, no rental history or past criminal records, hindering their ability to rent. Landlords traditionally don't allow additional family or friends to double up in units or allow pets, creating difficult decisions when given a choice to be housed but lose their social emotional support system.

Other issues impacting the ability to rent units for the homeless are related to the availability and affordability of private market housing. Vacancy rates in Yakima County have been around 2% since 2012. When vacancy rates are at 2% or below it represents the amount of time a unit is off the market as it is being prepared for the next waiting tenant to enter. The type of unit available can also impact a homeless person's ability to rent. Governmental housing subsidies have certain requirements that the unit size match the size of the household. The availability of studio and one bedroom units have decreased due to urban renewal and a desire for housing developers to build new 2-3 bedroom units that are more profitable.

Because of the tight demand for rental units the average rental cost has increased by up to \$100 over the same time period that vacancy rates have decreased. According to the 2015 Washington State Housing Needs Assessment by the Department of Commerce, households earning just 30% (\$15,960) of the median family income of \$53,200 face serious challenges in finding affordable housing when there are only 16 units that are affordable and available for every 100 of these households.

Housing is considered affordable when a household pays no more than 30% of its income for all housing costs. Households are considered cost burdened if they pay between 30%-50% of their income for housing expenses and are considered extremely cost burdened if they pay 50% or greater. 4,830 renter households in Yakima County are cost burdened and of that total 77% are considered severely cost burdened.

According to the 2016 Out of Reach report by the National Low Income Housing Alliance, Fair Market Rates for a two bedroom apartment are \$759 a month. The mean renters wage in Yakima County is \$10.47 making rent affordable at \$544 a month with a full-time job paying mean renter wage. A person working at minimum wage would have to work 56 hours a week to afford a two bedroom apartment at fair market rate in Yakima County.

Summary of issues and solutions

Overall homelessness is still declining in Yakima County but the number of chronically homeless has remained constant over the past few years. To impact this population the community needs to increase street outreach and implement more "Housing First" approaches. Housing First approaches are based on the concept that a homeless individual or household's first and primary need is to obtain stable housing, and that other issues that may affect the household can and should be addressed once housing is obtained. Communities also need to consider alternative housing models such as tiny housing communities, single room occupancy apartments or shared housing that is more affordable and better meets the housing needs of chronic homeless individuals.

Yakima County has a growing population of families with children who are in severe poverty rather than homeless. To better serve this population service providers need to reduce resources spent on under-housed families by replacing housing assistance with other less intensive diversion resources such as landlord mediation and limited term case management targeted only to the families with the highest vulnerability.

Yakima County is in a housing crisis as is the rest of the nation. Housing is not available or affordable to most low-income families or individuals and especially the unsheltered homeless. Local policy makers need to recognize this as a public crisis and develop communitywide plans. Plans need to include both public and private investment in creating more affordable housing stock through innovative funding mechanisms such as housing levies and “Pay for Success” models.

Finally, there are misperceptions and fear in our community that gets in the way of homelessness solutions. “There seems to be an urgency about addressing homelessness, but urgency hasn’t always led to lasting solutions. That may be less about resources than how people feel about poverty in general” says Sara Rankin, a Seattle University law professor who has studied the problem for years. “We’re fighting against instincts that make us want to turn away from homeless people.” Rankin said “there is a wealth of studies that show that “when we’re exposed to visible evidence of poverty we react to that with higher rates of disgust, anger and annoyance than exposure to any other marginalized trait.”

[Seattle Times, [5/22/16](#)]

I leave you with this quote from an unknown author. “The health of a community can be measured simply by the well-being of its least able. Long-term homelessness cuts an average of 20 years off the lifespan of a homeless person. It also reduces their productivity and increases the burden their presence places on the community. In short, homelessness exacts a cost on everyone – those with shelter and those without.”

For more information on Yakima County’s Point in Time Homeless count, visit www.YVCOG.org to download a copy of the Data Summary.

Tim Sullivan
Homeless Housing Program Manager
Yakima Valley Conference of Governments