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County/Cities Partnership Paying Off: Homeless Count Drops to the Lowest in 10 Years

2015 Point-in-Time Count Homeless Census and Survey Results

SANTA CLARA COUNTY, CALIF. – The Santa Clara County 2015 Homeless Census and Survey results released today revealed a 14 percent decrease in homelessness since 2013 to a new low of 6,556. This was the lowest homeless count over the past 10 years.

The biennial Point-in-Time count took place on January 27 and 28 and provides a snapshot of homelessness in the 15 cities and unincorporated areas. In addition to the count, 952 homeless persons took part in a qualitative survey that provides greater insight into the nature of homelessness in Santa Clara County.

“The good news is that the overall numbers are headed in the right direction,” said President Dave Cortese, County of Santa Clara Board of Supervisors, who identified addressing homelessness a top priority in his State of the County address and appointed a Housing Task Force to find solutions. “The County and its partners have made addressing chronic homelessness a top priority, and while we still have a large unmet need, those efforts are beginning to pay off.”

While the overall numbers are down, a close look at the cities reveals differences. San José’s numbers dropped 15 percent, in part the result of the City of San José’s pilot project to provide housing and employment services to individuals living in a targeted homeless encampment, resulting in over 175 people housed to date.

“We have more than 6,000 people living outside in this county and a lot of work to do with our partners to provide housing solutions,” said San José Mayor Sam Liccardo. “The San José City Council prioritized homeless response programs, recently committing \$3.5 million on an ongoing basis to our innovative Homeless Response Program and Rapid Re-Housing Team and while we’ve started to see modest gains to getting people out of unsafe living conditions, we’ve still got a long way to go.”

Increases and decreases in the numbers of homeless individuals were reported throughout the county. While the total number of homeless counted in the unincorporated areas went down to 500, a decrease of 336, South County experienced an increase of 344.

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"The overall decrease of 1,075 homeless is encouraging, but the data underscores the need for a regional approach to solving homelessness," said Supervisor Mike Wasserman.

"Permanent housing is so important: it breaks the cycle of homeless moving from one encampment or city to another. This is why the County is investing so heavily in housing for the homeless."

The Point-in-Time count includes both unsheltered persons and those in emergency shelters and transitional housing. The vast majority of the homeless counted 4,627 (71 percent) were unsheltered, living on the street, in abandoned buildings, in vehicles, or encampment areas.

The Point-in-Time Homeless Count is considered a conservative estimate and uses a different methodology than the recently released Cost of Homelessness report, which looked at specific cases and examined the cost of providing public services, such as emergency room and law enforcement, to the chronically homeless.

The biennial Homeless Census and Survey uses a consistent federally-approved methodology to estimate the number of people who are homeless in Santa Clara County at a point-in-time with a goal to develop strategies to reduce homelessness. This year, 335 volunteers, service providers and County and City employees registered as volunteers. Many community and faith-based organizations also helped with volunteer recruitment to assist census survey workers. Two-person teams ideally made up of a volunteer and a recruited/trained homeless person conducted the count. A mobile app was used to record data at encampments and youth whereabouts.

Key Findings

The key findings of the 2015 collaborative County/City collaborative Homeless Census and Survey include the following:

- **GENDER:** The majority of survey respondents are male (63%), 36% female and 1% transgender.
- **ETHNICITY/RACE:** 39% Hispanic/Latino, 32% White, 16% Black or African American, 8% multi-racial, 3% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 3% Asian
- **LGBTQ:** 10% identified as Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ), a higher percentage of youth under age 25 identified as LGBTQ (16%)
- **LENGTH OF TIME BEING HOMELESS:** 63% reported to be homeless for a year or more (an increase from 56% in 2013)
- **UNEMPLOYED:** 81% were unemployed (compared to 74% in 2013)
- **HEALTH CONDITIONS:** 65% of respondents reported one or more health conditions, including chronic physical illness, chronic substance abuse, and severe mental health conditions. 39% reported a psychiatric or emotional condition, 38% reported drug or alcohol abuse, 30% reported a physical disability, 25% reported having Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and 12% reported a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).
- **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:** 27% of respondents reported experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime, including 44% of female respondents. Among respondents who reported any experience of domestic violence, 17% reported it was the primary cause of their homelessness.
- **INCARCERATION:** 30% of respondents had spent at least one night in jail or prison in the 12 months prior to the survey.

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Housing and Service Needs

A comparison of the 2013 and 2015 Point-in-Time Counts shows a significant decline in the number of people homeless. However, the need for housing and services remains high: 4,627 homeless men, women, and children were living on the streets or in other places not meant for human habitation in January, 2015. Taking into account vacancies in existing facilities and projects under development, over 4,000 temporary and permanent housing units are needed just to meet the immediate need to move unsheltered individuals and families off the streets.

Between 2011 and 2014, through the Countywide Housing 1000 campaign led by Destination: Home, in collaboration with the County of Santa Clara, San José and several community partners and funding organizations, 865 chronically homeless participants were housed.

“While our work is far from over, the decrease in homelessness indicates our collective progress,” said Jennifer Loving, Executive Director, Destination: Home. “The recently released Home Not Found cost study shows the financial benefit of housing and the new Point-in-Time count tells us that our strategy is working. Our efforts are making a difference and the City and County should be applauded for their commitment and investment in ending homelessness.”

This past May, the Housing Authority of the County of Santa Clara announced that it will begin the process of releasing up to 1,000 additional federal Section 8 project-based rental housing vouchers to selected housing developers and property owners through a competitive request for proposals process. Because despite having these vouchers, low income individuals and families still have difficulty finding landlords willing to accept them.

“About 600 of our families with housing vouchers in hand are searching for units to rent, but the low vacancy rates and high rents are keeping them locked out of the market,” said Alex Sanchez, Executive Director of HACSC. “While we know the availability of up to 1,000 project-based vouchers will not instantly produce more affordable homes, the development of new housing that stays affordable over time is clearly the best solution to our valley’s housing crisis.”

Significantly more permanent affordable housing, including supportive housing for those with disabilities, is needed to end homelessness in Santa Clara County. Locally, a diverse group of public and private partners have come together to address this need through implementation of the Community Plan to End Homelessness in Santa Clara County 2015-2020. This plan creates a communitywide road map toward ending homelessness by disrupting systems, building housing, and serving people through client-centered strategies targeting resources to the specific individual or household.

During the current Fiscal Year (2015), the County of Santa Clara is spending \$91.5 million on housing and homeless services across all departments. An additional \$6.7 million will be added for permanent supportive housing in Fiscal Year 2016, which begins on July 1.

“The homeless Census and Survey shows that our collective efforts are beginning to gain traction,” said Ky Le, Director of Homeless Systems, County of Santa Clara. “Our partners understand the urgency and the need. We are committed to building on the momentum.”

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