

To: Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and Housing

From: HomeBase

Date: July 20, 2007

Re: Homeless Counts—Part II

I. Introduction—Setting the Context

At the last RSC meeting, held on April 22, 2007, we discussed the January 2007 homeless count conducted by each continua of care in the Bay Area and beyond. Every two years, jurisdictions that receive Federal funding for homeless assistance through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act are required to conduct a point in time count homeless count. Jurisdictions must count sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals within in 24-hour period during the last two weeks of January.

At the time of the April meeting, several communities were still in the process of analyzing and processing their count data and had not yet released it to the public. However, using the data that was available at the time, we held a discussion on the methodologies used in different communities, the 2007 results compared 2005 results, and the benefit the count has to communities or to homeless people in communities. Several key questions came out of that discussion related to methodologies used to collect accurate data and how to use the homeless count data now that it has been collected. It was decided that the importance of these issues warranted a more extensive discussion at the July RSC meeting, after all Bay Area continua had analyzed and published their 2007 count data.

This memo divides information into to two topics for discussion: count methodology and how communities can use their homeless count data. Within each of these sections, information and examples are given followed by the questions raised at the last meeting.

II. Methodologies for Conducting Homeless Counts

CoC's are required by HUD to provide "statistically reliable, unduplicated counts or estimates of homeless persons in sheltered and unsheltered locations".¹ For the sheltered count, CoCs must count all adults, children and unaccompanied youth residing in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and people residing in a hotel/motel using a voucher paid for by a public/private agency because the person is homeless.² CoCs must

¹ 2007 Continuum of Care Application, Instructions for Chart K, p. iv.

² Most of the information in this paragraph is from *A Guide to Counting Unsheltered People Revised*. Published by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development. September 29, 2006. Available at www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/library/webcast101006/street_count_guide.pdf

collect subpopulation information on the number of sheltered homeless people who are chronically homeless, seriously mentally ill, chronic substance abusers, veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic violence and unaccompanied youth. CoC's must also count all unsheltered adults, children and unaccompanied youth sleeping in places not meant for human habitation".³ Of these unsheltered people counted, CoCs must count or estimate the number who are chronically homeless. HUD requires that CoCs report only the number of people actually counted through an actual count or through a statistically reliable sample and extrapolation.

HUD allows CoC's to determine method of enumeration that fits their community. In designing their counts, communities must take in to account the size (population and geographical) of the CoC and the expected population of homeless people. CoCs that are very urban in nature will have different needs than suburban or rural communities. Availability of volunteers, the safety issues that arise when conducting a public count, and the resources a CoC has to conduct their count all affect the methodology a community chooses. Below are general overviews of the most common methods communities use to conduct their sheltered and unsheltered homeless counts.

Count of Unsheltered People

Several different methods or a combination of methods can be effective in counting unsheltered people experiencing homelessness.

Observational count of people in places not meant for human habitation

This method, also called a "simple street count", involves teams entering specific geographical spaces and counting individuals they observe and who appear to be homeless, with minimal interaction. Organizers set criteria for enumerators to use when deciding which people they observe should be counted as homeless. A community can count an entire geographical space (such as an entire city), without exception or only count unsheltered people in known locations where people who are homeless congregate or sleep. In conducting a complete coverage count, teams of enumerators canvass a specific territory, often requiring them to enter parks and abandoned building and search under highway overpasses and other places where people may sleep or congregate out of view. It requires coordination so that teams count their entire territory, without crossing into other territories and duplicate the count. For example, San Francisco conducted a simple street count in all areas of the city without exception. In areas that were deemed too unsafe for volunteers to enter, such as certain parks and highway on-ramps, the City utilized the services of the San Francisco Police Department and the California Highway Patrol.

³ Places not meant for human habitation include: streets, parks, alleys, parking ramps, parts of the highway system, transportation depots and other parts of transportation systems (e.g. subway tunnels, railroad car), all-night commercial establishments (e.g. movie theaters, laundromats, restaurants), abandoned buildings, building roofs, or stairwells, chicken coops and other farm outbuildings, caves, campground vehicles, and other similar places. (2007 CoC Application, Chart K instructions)

An enumeration of people in known locations requires researching and identifying locations where people experiencing homelessness tend to congregate and sending teams to count people in those locations. Marin County focused their count on identified places where homeless people slept in West Marin, Mill Valley, Fairfax, San Rafael, Novato and less developed areas of the county. In Solano County, their teams included homeless people to help them identify known places of congregation and also in an effort to assist volunteers with making contact with people residing in those locations.

Simple street counts are the easiest to organize and summarize. However, there is minimal interaction in conducting a simple street count and generally little in-depth information is collected, aside from numbers and locations. There is also room for error in determining whether or not someone fits the criteria for being counted or different observers may apply the criteria differently. In some cases it may be possible to collect some information on gender and race. It is also impossible to count every single person and organizers may “estimate” the number of uncounted people without using a reliable method. Some communities utilize both methods, conducting a complete coverage count in dense urban or downtown areas and counting people in known locations in outlying areas.

An Interview and Count of People In Places not Meant for Human Habitation

This method involves adding an interview component to the basic observational street count. This allows a community to gather important demographic information about unsheltered homeless people. Organizers follow the same procedure as a direct observational count, except they also add an interview to the process. Enumerators can either interview every person counted or only interview a random sample of the people counted. In Solano County, organizers interviewed every person counted which allowed them to gather more comprehensive demographic information on every counted, unsheltered homeless person.

Adding an interview component provides organizers with comprehensive data not available when counting is only done through observation. This additional data can be used to identify patterns of homelessness in a community, services usage and requirements, to design policy or programs, to differentiate between people who are chronically homeless and who are not, and to prevent duplication in counting. For example, in Marin County interviews with people on the streets provided information on individuals and families that are living in doubled-up situations in order to have an indoor place to sleep. This information would not have been available without a more in-depth interview.

Adding an interview component adds time and requires additional resources. CoCs must complete their count within a short period of time and interviews may not be possible within this time frame. People may not be willing to talk to interviewers or they may be sleeping during the time of the count. CoCs may consider offering incentives such as meal vouchers or blankets. Interviewers must also be trained on issues of cultural competency, safety and interviewing techniques. Many communities choose only to

interview a sample of the overall people counted. If using this method, CoCs must decide what size interview sample is necessary to provide the analysis they desire.

Using a Sampling Method with Extrapolation to Count Unsheltered People

This method involves counting or interviewing a sample of homeless people in a specific geographic location and using statistically reliable extrapolation techniques to produce the unsheltered population total. This method requires expert statistical design and analysis both to determine the sample size and to extrapolate final count data. This method is being used in New York where it is not possible to effectively cover the entire, dense, urban geographical location in a single night.

Screening and Interviewing at Non-Shelter Service Provider Locations

An alternative to the street count involves identifying service providers and programs that serve unsheltered homeless people. The CoC must agree upon a list of providers and work with those providers to conduct interviews during the time of the count. Programs surveyed include outreach programs, soup kitchens or clothes programs, Health Care for the Homeless Sites, mainstream benefits programs, employment centers, libraries, and day labor sites. This method requires asking screener questions to ensure that the people being counted are actually unsheltered and to avoid duplication.

Many CoCs combine service-based enumeration or interviews with their street count. For example Napa County conducted a simple street count and a survey at their largest services resource center to increase the count coverage and to gather additional information. Measures were put in place to prevent duplication. San Francisco also followed up their street count with a survey conducted at service sites throughout the city. The survey was not used in the enumeration, but it provided supplemental information on demographics and whether or not someone was chronically homeless.

Count of Sheltered People

CoCs are required to conduct a point-in-time count of homeless persons residing in shelters on the night of the count. This includes emergency shelters, transitional programs, hotel/motel voucher programs and domestic violence shelters. Shelters must report on the total number of individuals, the total number of persons in families with children and the number of persons in families without children. Additionally, shelters must provide information on the number persons in each of the seven subpopulations⁴ (including chronically homeless).

Using HMIS

Communities that have fully operational HMIS system can use this database to collect information on sheltered homeless persons. However, the system must have broad coverage over all programs providing shelter in order to use it as the sole method for counting. Additionally, if the system does not collect or has inaccurate client level data, it cannot be used count the specific subpopulations. However, even if a CoCs HMIS

⁴ The subpopulations are chronically homeless, severely mentally ill, chronic substance abusers, veterans, persons with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic violence and unaccompanied youth (under 18).

system is not fully operational, it can provide data on those programs that are using the system, or be used to supplement data gathered by other means.

Provider and Client Surveys

Many CoCs choose to conduct their sheltered count using provider and client surveys. Standardized surveys can be designed to gather client level data as well as housing inventory and provider information. Shelter workers and volunteers can complete surveys either by talking to clients or using intake forms, case management documents or HMIS.

Some CoCs choose to gather information from institutions where homeless people reside (hospitals, jails, residential treatment centers), even though HUD does not consider these individuals homeless by their definition. For example, in addition to surveying homeless shelters, Santa Clara County also gathered information on people residing in hospitals, residential rehabilitation facilities and jails. San Francisco also counted people in hospitals and jails.

Questions

- What methods did communities use that resulted in the most accurate count? How can we evaluate methods for accuracy and thoroughness?
- How did communities count people in hard to access places such as private property, jails and hospitals?
- What demographic data did communities collect during the count and what method was used to collect it?
- How can HMIS be of greater value during this process?
- What would communities change about the requirements and why?

III. What does Homeless Count Data Mean?

During Part I of this discussion at the April 2007 RSC meeting, communities raised several questions about what to do with their homeless count data once it is totaled and analyzed. Aside from the basic requirement that CoCs use their data when completing their HUD funding applications, homeless count data can be used in a number of ways from strategic planning and program development to community education. Homeless count data should also be analyzed along with other important community demographic information to determine is patterns emerge.

How Can Communities Use Their Homeless Count Data?

HUD requires CoCs to conduct bi-annual homeless counts and for the last few years, to report the findings of those counts when completing their consolidated application for homeless assistance funding. Aside from this requirement, the data that results from these counts has other important purposes and implications. Count data can and is being used for community and policy planning and program development. Homeless count,

especially when it provides detailed demographic information, can highlight the need for targeted services for specific subpopulations or in geographic areas. Count data can be used to inform the public by highlighting the need for services and support or to report that progress is being made in reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness. Planning, organizing and completing the homeless counts is time consuming and can be expensive for communities, however it also provides an opportunity to access data that can help communities, advocates and programs make changes that will be effective towards the goal of ending homelessness. Here are a few examples of ways that homeless count data is being used in other communities.

The Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress

In February 2007, HUD released the first Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR). This report is the result of a four-year project to develop, collect and analyze information on people experiencing homelessness from a nationally representative sample of communities. Two local data sources provided the information for the report. The first source was HMIS data on sheltered homeless persons in communities. The second source was point-in-time data on sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons collected during the January 2005 count, and reported in the 2005 HUD CoC funding applications. The report gives a comprehensive report of the number of homeless people on a single day in the U.S., how many people are utilizing shelters and transitional housing programs, where they are accessing them, and in what patterns, demographics of the populations affected by homelessness and the national capacity for providing housing and shelter. Shortcomings have been identified in the data, but this information will be used to strengthen future data collection and reports. As subsequent reports are produced, a longitudinal examination of homelessness will emerge to provide a better understanding of homeless on the national and local scales. Data from this and future AHAR reports will be used to strategically allocate funding, technical assistance and improve program operations and policy.

The AHAR report can be found at: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/ahar.cfm>

No Longer Homeless In Montana

The State of Montana, through the Intergovernmental Human Services Bureau of the Department of Public Health and Human Services, has used homeless count data as the foundation for public education materials, a detailed report setting out next steps and the data has been integrated their Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. In 2003, Montana conducted an unduplicated, point in time count of homeless people in Montana during the last three days of April. A detailed report was produced which provided information on the demographics of homeless people, the factors that precipitate homelessness, obstacles to ending homelessness and the services that homeless people identified as needing. This report then laid out priorities for state and local change based on this data. In addition to the report, one page summary was created and used in communities to educate the general public on the issue of homelessness. This single page is attached at the end of this memo. Two more enumerations were conducted in January 2005 and in January 2006. This data, combined with the 2003 data, was incorporated into *No Longer Homeless in Montana, a Report on the State of Homelessness and a Ten Year Plan to*

End It. The report and plan compares data across the years, and uses the most recent data to form a comprehensive strategy for ending homelessness in the State. The homeless count data provides a foundation for these strategies, but also for the personal accounts intertwined throughout the document, bringing a face to the people in need of the services the strategies call for.

Denver's Road Home

In July 2005 The Mile High City unveiled the Ten Year Plan to End Homeless, as part of the larger Denver's Road Home—Ending Homeless, Restoring Hope Campaign. This integrated effort to end homeless in their city includes strategic planning and a strong public relations and education component. A comprehensive website (www.denversroadhome.org) provides information on the 10 Year plan, homelessness in Denver, progress updates, and information on how citizens and businesses can get involved. In addition to the website, Denver has also published an annual progress report and brochures for public distribution. Integrated into all this material is data from Denver's homeless counts, including basic count information and more specific demographic information. Homeless count data is used to identify the issues and provide information on the homeless population in Denver. The data from the count is also used to demonstrate that progress is being made towards the goals stated in the 10 Year Plan. Denver's Road Home is using strategic planning, combined with community support in an effort to end homelessness for the city's citizens. Homeless count data is one tool they are using to reach their goals.

Individual Programs Using Homeless Count Data to Apply for Funding

Homeless count data can also be used by individual agencies to demonstrate to funders that specific needs exist in their community for targeted programs and funding. Homeless count data, particularly when it is rich in demographic detail, can identify the need for specific services such as mental health or employment or services targeted to subpopulations such as youth or veterans. Organizations or programs that provide these services can cite homeless count data as support for their applications for funding or in designing new programs. For example, a program in Washington State was able to cite data that supported their application for mental health funding. The program's application used the data to establish that their services would meet an identified unmet need in the community and that they would target populations that were underserved. As communities continue to produce comprehensive data about homeless people in their communities, organizations and programs can use that data not only for program design and development, but in their fundraising efforts as well.

What does Homeless Count Data tell us about our communities?

Homelessness is an issue that cannot be isolated from the larger issues of poverty and housing affordability in our communities. Minimum wage jobs and public benefits checks are inadequate to allow individuals to afford market rate rent and often even "affordable" housing is unaffordable. Many individuals experiencing homelessness have poor job histories, mental health and substance abuse issue and/or chronic health

problems that exacerbate the already difficult task of navigating the high cost of living in the Bay Area.

It is important that communities examine their homeless count data as part of a larger analysis of county population, poverty, unemployment and cost of living data. What patterns or correlations exist between these numbers? Do factors such as unemployment or mainstream benefit access correlate with the percentage of homeless people in a community? How does the racial demographic of the homeless population compare to the general population or to housed people living below the poverty level? Does homeless count data, compared to the overall county population indicate success in reducing homelessness? What predictions or estimates can be made by examining the data?

In order to begin a discussion on these questions, as well as the questions below (raised at the April 2007 meeting) HomeBase has compiled data from each Bay Area County. This data includes homeless count data from the 2005 and 2007 counts, county population, AMI, percentage of people living below the poverty line, and information on mainstream benefits use.

Questions

- Do decreases in homeless count numbers from 2005 to 2007 actually mean a reduction in homelessness?
- What is the relationship between the number of homeless people counted and funding? How do communities show progress in reducing homelessness, but still demonstrate that additional resources are needed in the community?
- How can the data be used locally to achieve change?
- What does the data tell us about our community? What relationship does the homeless count data have to the overall population, the percentage of people living below the poverty line, the number of people on public benefits, the unemployment rate, etc.