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Annual Homeless Count Decreases, but Still Higher than Ten-Year Average

During the first half of 2023, homeless service providers and volunteers in Knoxville and Knox County conducted three important annual assessments: (1) the Point-in-Time (PIT) Count of people experiencing homelessness; (2) an assessment of bed availability for homeless services called the Housing Inventory Count (HIC); and (3) the Youth Point-in-Time (YPIT) Count of youth ages 18 to 24 experiencing homelessness.

The annual PIT count of individuals experiencing homelessness was conducted on January 25. This count provides a snapshot of how many people were experiencing homelessness on a single night, at one point in time. Because some people may experience homelessness briefly at any point during the year, a cumulative number of everyone experiencing homelessness throughout the whole year will be much larger than this single snapshot. A team of 30 volunteers recorded a total of 925 people who were in “literally homeless” housing situations. This includes people living in sheltered situations (residing in an emergency shelter or transitional housing) and unsheltered situations (residing in tents, cars or other places not meant for human habitation).

Between 2022 and 2023 there was a 21% decrease in the number of people counted as homeless during the Point-in-Time count (from 1178 to 925). Most of the decrease resulted from reduced federal funding for sheltering people and families in hotels: the number of clients sheltered in hotels dropped from 228 to 59. The decrease was also driven by an observed reduction in unsheltered homelessness on the night of each year's count (from 373 in 2022 to 223 in 2023). Despite a year-over-year 40% decrease in unsheltered homelessness, this year's unsheltered count is still 29% higher than the average count for the past ten years (173). The last three years have been the highest on record. These increases coincide with increased staffing for street outreach, allowing for a more accurate count overall.

“In contrast to sheltered counts, unsheltered counts should always be viewed as the floor, not the ceiling. The unsheltered count is a baseline understanding, not the total number of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness in a given community,” says Shawn Griffith, Program Manager at the Knoxville-Knox County Office of Housing Stability. “Unsheltered individuals often stay in out-of-the-way places that are difficult to find, they often move (or are forced to move) from one location to another, and many transition fluidly over time between tent, shelter and precarious housing situations.”

The HIC is conducted each year on the same night as the PIT count, and measures bed availability in emergency shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing programs. On January 25, 2023, emergency shelters were 92% full (500 of 542 beds occupied); transitional housing was 73% full (198 of 271 beds occupied); and permanent supportive housing facilities were 96% full (304 of 317 beds occupied).

The YPIT was completed in April 2023. Partners and volunteers counted a total of 68 unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness or unstable housing. Unlike the general PIT Count, the YPIT also includes youth in precarious housing situations such as staying temporarily on couches with friends or extended family.

Of the youth who responded to the full survey, two-thirds (34/51) reported a history of domestic violence, and nearly four out of five (39/50) expressed mental health challenges. Nearly 40% (19/49) had been in foster care. That same percentage, 40%, identify as LGBTQ+ (19/49). The count was conducted with leadership from the Knoxville-Knox County Homeless Coalition, Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, KnoxHMIS (Knox Homeless Management Information System), and the Knoxville-Knox County Homeless Coalition's Youth Action Board, composed of youth with lived experience of homelessness.

Homeless services organizations in Knoxville and Knox County are working hard to help. "KnoxHMIS data indicate that nearly 4,000 homeless clients have been housed since 2020. But for every homeless individual who is successfully housed, three remain unhoused or exit to unknown destinations," says Nate First, Program Director of KnoxHMIS (Homeless Management Information System) and Chair of the Knoxville-Knox County Homeless Coalition.

"Homelessness continues to be a big issue," says Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs. "There's a lot of money and resources flowing into this area and our goal is to use it as effectively as possible. Further, we have a responsibility to the taxpayers to make sure we use the money as wisely as possible."

According to [KnoxHMIS's community dashboard](#), 65% of households new to homelessness in the second quarter of 2023 listed job loss or housing scarcity/affordability as the primary reason for their homelessness. Another 24% were fleeing domestic violence or nonviolent family confrontations. Only 8% reported legal issues and struggles with mental health or substance misuse as the cause of their homelessness.

"Homelessness is a bellwether issue for any community: its roots extend deep into the housing market, the job market, and the economy as a whole. It's important for us to know the extent of the problem, as well as the reasons people are falling into homelessness," says Erin Read, the Executive Director of the Knoxville-Knox County Office of Housing Stability. "With this knowledge we can tailor programs and policies to address our housing and social needs."

Since 2019, the City of Knoxville has invested more than \$38 million on the creation of affordable housing units and leveraged \$500 million in other public and private investments. The result, when everything is completed, will be more than 2,000 units available to residents with incomes below the average area income.

"We are investing more in affordable housing than any previous administration," says City of Knoxville Mayor Indya Kincannon. "Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, and while we know

there is still a lot of work to be done, each project does make a difference. We are committed to continuing that progress.”

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