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HOMELESSNESS

Annual homeless count shows 15% increase in 2022

Outreach workers surveyed 1,805 homeless residents in Marion and Polk counties during an annual January point-in-time count. This year, a higher share were staying in shelters as opposed to on the streets or in parks.

By Ardeshir Tabrizian - Salem Reporter
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Lindsay Dent, program manager at The ARCHES Project, speaks with Angel Rodriguez during the annual point-in-time count to

assess homelessness, in Salem on Tuesday, Jan. 25, 2022. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)

Salem outreach workers had a tougher time finding homeless camps during the city's annual count of its homeless residents in January - but still recorded a 15% increase over 2021.

The count this year found there were 1,805 people experiencing homelessness in one day in January. Of those, 879 were unsheltered and 926 were in emergency shelter.

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That's compared to 1,005 unsheltered and 549 in emergency shelter during the 2021 PIT count, totaling 1,554 people.

In years past, workers who conduct the count knew where to look for unsheltered people.

Recent sweeps of camps in places like Wallace Marine Park have made that search more complicated, said Robert Marshall, ARCHES Program Manager and co-chair of the Mid-Willamette Valley Homeless Alliance's 2022 Point-In-Time Count.

He said outreach workers had to expand into more wooded areas to find and count people., The annual count

in January is required by the federal government to receive services for homeless funding.

The count fluctuates every year, said Jan Calvin, consultant for the Mid-Willamette Valley Homeless Alliance.

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The alliance is the Marion and Polk county region's continuum of care, a program that the federal government distributes funding for homeless services to. It's still fairly new, approved by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development in Dec. 2019

"Even though the region has had (point-in-time) counts in the past, we're looking at what what can we do to really make sure we're getting as much coverage as possible, Calvin said. "So, what's interesting for us is we don't know, is it because we got more volunteers out, spent more time? We increased the effort. Is that why the numbers went up? Or did we come upon more people because there's more people out there?"

This year, 35% of those counted were women, 64% were men and 1% identified with another gender, according to a news release.

Calvin said the count undercounts people living on the street but "does a very good job" counting people in shelters.

“We don't have a definitive number and we never will, because it changes every day,” she said. But still looking at knowing what the data means is so important, and the real questions I think come after people start seeing data and then wondering about it.”

Marshall said the city of Salem agreed not to sweep any camps in the month leading up to this year’s count.

“They did honor that,” he said. “But the community members kind of get a sense of, “Oh man, I've probably been here a little too long, I should start pushing into more wooded areas. And so some people are just kind of hiding on their own, and one of the ways that we utilize in our outreach is ahead of time to go into those areas and kind of scout them out.”

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Lindsay Dent, program manager at The ARCHES Project, speaks with Riva Salmela during the annual point-in-time count to assess homelessness, in Salem on Tuesday, Jan. 25, 2022. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)

Marshall said they also made an effort this year to reach out to rural partners in the Santiam Canyon and Polk County to cover the region more thoroughly.

As outreach workers searched for people who may be homeless, he said a GPS monitoring system tracked their surveys and where they were conducted as they came in. That allowed count organizers to send out more teams to areas they didn't see reflected on the map.

They had 227 volunteers, shelter staff and outreach workers counting this year, up from 140 in 2021.

The effort saw a significant boost in volunteers, he said, likely due to the availability of vaccines compared to last year.

Marshall encouraged people wanting to get involved not to wait for the next point-in-time count and said they should find social service providers in the Salem area that are aligned with their values as a volunteer.

"Just getting involved in a community, and hearing the stories of those that are experiencing homelessness and then using your voice to share their stories," he said. "There's a lot of work to do when it comes to ending homelessness, and the best way to change those is by having community members that are willing to advocate for change and that are going to hold people accountable to make sure those changes are happening."

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