THOSE WITHOUT HOMES

Westminster, CO 2017 Report

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WITHOUT HOMES: WESTMINSTER, CO

A BRIEF HISTORY

In 2014, citizens began contacting City Staff in several departments about what they were experiencing and seeing in Westminster: a rise in visible homelessness. In early 2015, City Staff from seven (7) departments formed an Internal Homeless Task Force (task force) to study the issue of homelessness. Over the course of 2015, the task force conducted traditional research, toured encampments, met with the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) director, and met with Aurora Neighborhood Services while continuing to share information across City departments. During the City Council Study Session on January 4, 2016, the task force presented several recommendations to City Council. At that meeting, City Council instructed Staff not to criminalize homelessness, to pursue potential new staff to serve as a resource on homelessness issues, and to create a coalition comprised of area stakeholders.

As Staff researched what the function of a new position should be, more than 75 key stakeholder interviews were held. These included each one of the City Councillors, key City Staff members, the eight (8) shelters in Adams and Jefferson counties, faith-based organizations in Westminster, Northglenn and Arvada, homelessness liaisons in the three school districts serving Westminster, non-profit service providers, business owners and managers, and food banks. From those interviews, important steps were identified, including gathering data about homelessness, determining how to prevent homelessness from occurring, connecting people to services when needed, and working with non-profits, the faith-based community, and other governmental entities.

There were some notable distinctions between the thoughts of persons directly involved with the City and persons affiliated with other organizations. The main distinction was that the City stakeholders wanted the position to connect people to already existing resources. Those from other organizations repeatedly stated that there were not enough existing resources to meet the ever-growing demand. During the interviews, it was noted that persons from outside organizations envisioned that the City would be establishing a social services division; however, state law (Sections 26-1-115 and 26-1-116, C.R.S.) only allows the State of Colorado or counties to operate human services functions with the exception of the City and County of Denver and the City and County of Broomfield.

However, common themes also emerged from the discussions, including:

- A willingness to take care of our own.
- Exploring ways to connect people with already existing services.
- Understanding the role that Westminster plays in preventing homelessness.
- Viewing homelessness as a regional issue on which the City must partner with other agencies.

In October 2016, City Council added a 3-year position to the City aimed at addressing homelessness and citywide grant development as part of the 2017-2018 budget cycle. In mid-January 2017, Kate Skarbek began working in this newly-created homelessness liaison role.

While conducting key stakeholder interviews, Staff discovered that two different county-wide homeless coalitions already exist: Adams County Coalition for the Homeless that meets monthly and Jefferson County Heading Home that meets bimonthly with specific workgroups meeting in alternating months. Both coalitions include representation from homeless service providers, the faith-based community, businesses, and governmental agencies. Creating a similar homelessness coalition focused only on Westminster would have duplicated already existing workgroups and risked isolating Westminster from regional solutions. Instead, Westminster's homelessness liaison attends both county-wide coalitions and has encouraged some cross-over attendance. Representatives from MDHI now also attend both groups, further promoting regional collaboration.

In September 2017, Westminster's Internal Homeless Task Force reconvened with representatives from eleven (11) City departments and offices. The task force formed to ensure that Staff members across the organization are aware of new trends in homelessness in the City and throughout the region. The members are charged with sharing information with the task force about the experiences of their immediate workgroups and sharing information with their workgroups learned as part of the task force. Members also serve in an advisory capacity on how to better communicate with the public, businesses, and City Staff regarding homelessness issues. The City's homelessness liaison currently serves as the chair of this task force, sharing information she learns at meetings with surrounding jurisdictions, non-profits, and the faith-based community.

Building relationships with more than 35 non-profit, governmental, and faith-based organizations during the first year of this position supports City Council's Strategic Plan goal of approaching homelessness as a regional issue.

REGIONAL HOMELESSNESS LANDSCAPE IN EARLY 2018

As discussed above, throughout 2017 conversations between the City and other agencies continued. In mid-2016, Jefferson County Human Services created a new position to address homelessness and housing. In September 2017, the Adams County Office of Regional Affairs hired a homelessness coordinator. Throughout 2017, municipalities in Adams County and Jefferson County began appointing staff members to work on homelessness issues and by late November 2017, the following cities had positions addressing homelessness: Arvada, Commerce City, Golden, Lakewood, Northglenn, Thornton and Wheat Ridge. While the municipalities do not have full time staff dedicated to homelessness, both counties do.

Westminster is now positioned to begin acting regionally, with multiple other agencies willing to do the same.

There are several regional initiatives already planned:

- Jefferson County Homeless Summit will be held during the first quarter of 2018.
- Adams County will be conducting a Homeless Needs Assessment with a consultant during the first half of 2018.
- The Housing First National Conference will be held in Denver in April 2018.
- The City and County of Denver will host their annual Affordable Housing Summit on May 24, 2018.

THE DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS DETERMINES THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS

There are two primary definitions of homelessness in the United States. The first is from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The HEARTH Act, passed in May 2009, amended the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and included a revised definition of homeless that applied to HUD's Homeless Assistance Programs. On December 5, 2011 HUD commenced its rulemaking process by publishing the Final Rule Defining Homeless (76 FR 75994). This rule amended the definition of HUD's existing homeless programs - the Shelter Plus Care Program (24 CFR 582), the Supportive Housing Program (24 CFR 583), the Emergency Solutions Grants Program (24 CFR Part 576) and incorporated the revised homeless definition into the Consolidated Plan regulation (24 CFR Part 91). Subsequently, HUD adopted the same definition in its Continuum of Care Program (24 CFR 578). As described in the preamble of the Final Rule Defining Homeless, the final rule establishes four categories of homelessness. These categories are:

(1) Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes a subset for an individual who is exiting an institution where he or she resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution;

(2) Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence;

(3) Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; or

(4) Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member.

HUD requires its Continuum of Care agencies such as the Denver Metro Homeless Initiative (MDHI) to engage in an annual count of those meeting the first definition of homelessness. This is known as Point-in-Time (PIT), where the best data available is gathered across the nation during the last week of January. The PIT only counts those who are living outside or in areas not intended for human habitation such as a car, or if the person's shelter is being paid for by an agency; this does not capture all persons meeting the definitions of homeless above. Further complicating the matter is that data from the PIT is compiled only by county, not by city.

The count is taken on a single night each year to reduce the likelihood of the same person being counted more than once. At the same time, this methodology is better designed for urban homelessness in cities where there are concentrated areas of homeless services such as in the City and County of Denver. Both Adams and Jefferson counties, on the other hand, have large stretches of rural lands and no single centralized places where homeless persons are likely to be found. The shelter providers do count those they are housing in emergency shelters or transitional housing, accounting for the majority of the baseline count. Unfortunately, for instance, the Comitis Crisis Center shelter count of more than 100 was inadvertently not included in the Adams County count in 2016 and 2017, in large part contributing to the decreasing count in that county. Steps are being taken to ensure that this omission is not repeated in 2018. Regardless, finding people outdoors who are willing to participate in the PIT survey is far more challenging. In fact, Adams County spans 1,184 square miles and Jefferson County 774 square miles. Each county usually has twenty (20) volunteers counting on the night of the PIT. This is almost guaranteed to lead to an undercount.

The table below shows the PIT counts for Adams and Jefferson counties over the last four years.

PIT Count of Homeless People

Year	Adams County	Jefferson County	Total
2014	532	611	1,143
2015	572	564	1,136
2016	200	439	639
2017	157	394	551

On average, according to the American Community Survey 5 Year Population Estimate, Westminster's population is 10.8% of the total populations of the two counties it is within. If that same percentage is applied to the average total of those meeting the PIT count of both counties between 2014 and 2017, then, Westminster has 93.31 unsheltered homeless on a single night of the year. Westminster's number of 93.31 unsheltered homeless individuals is rounded up to 100 to slightly compensate for the likely undercount and send the message that it is an estimate only.

In January 2018, Adams and Jefferson Counties held multiple Everyone Counts events at strategic locations in the hope of bringing people living in unsheltered conditions indoors to participate in the survey. Incentives, largely donated by the business community, were given away at each event taking place between sundown on Monday, January 29, and sundown on Tuesday, January 30. The Westminster Everyone Counts event was held at the Swim & Fitness Center from 5 to 8 p.m. on Monday, January 29. A free warm dinner, showers, health checks, dental kits, blankets, sleeping bags, clothes, and more were available and distributed. Westminster's event brought in between 30 and 40 unsheltered homeless who participated in the PIT, compared to only one (1) who participated in the outdoor survey in 2017. To publicize the event, posters and flyers were visible in the Parks, Recreation and Libraries (PRL) facilities and flyers were also hand-delivered to those living outdoors by police officers, parks and open space staff, rental inspectors, and Fire emergency medical services staff.

The Everyone Counts event went hand-in-hand with street outreach in Adams County. In addition to the Everyone Counts event, street outreach was conducted with professional outreach workers from the Denver and Aurora homeless service providers administering the surveys. Law enforcement agencies throughout the county provided lists of known homeless camping sites in the month leading up to the PIT. Each site was visited on the day of the PIT and in the two weeks leading up to the PIT by the street outreach workers for two primary purposes. The first was to ensure people living outdoors knew about the Everyone Counts event and the services they could obtain there. The second purpose was to gain familiarity with the people and the territory while assessing whether street outreach could work in various parts of the county.

Street outreach workers believe outreach can be successful in both Westminster and Commerce City. This is largely due to the positive, trusting relationships the police officers in these jurisdictions have established with those living outdoors. The street outreach workers were surprised by the number of unaccompanied youth living in Westminster. Unaccompanied youth are defined by HUD as age 15 to 24. Most of the Westminster contacts were between the ages of 18 and 24.

The Department of Education offers the other standard definition of homelessness. Each school district across the nation is mandated to have a homelessness liaison who not only counts the number of homeless students but also acts as a case manager for the families of the students. The Department of Education definition of homelessness includes all four definitions outlined by HUD, including those families who are doubled- or tripled-up in housing unit intended for one family for financial reasons. The Department of Education uses this expanded definition because the students who are doubled- or tripled-up or "couch surfing" have the same educational attainment levels as their unsheltered counterparts; yet, they are 400 times less likely to graduate from high school. Study after study continue to show that homeless children are 20% more likely to suffer from a chronic health condition following them into adulthood.

> "Research has shown that homelessness experienced during early childhood is harmful to a child's growth and development. The stress of homelessness during early childhood can cause harmful changes in brain and body function, in turn leading to higher levels of stress-related chronic diseases later in life. Recent research from Children's HealthWatch used data from more than 20,000 caregivers of low-income children under the age of 4 with public or no health insurance to examine the timing and duration effects of homelessness on children's health.

Results show that the younger and longer a child experiences homelessness, the greater the cumulative toll of negative health outcomes, which can have lifelong effects on the child, the family, and the community." (Hsu).

Both the increased risk of chronic health conditions and the decreased likelihood of graduation from high school either establishes or continues generational poverty for these families.

Statewide, there were 23,954 pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade students meeting the Department of Education's definition of homelessness during the 2015-16 school year, the most recent data available. During that same school year, the total enrollment of pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade students in Colorado was 898,845; those meeting the Department of Education's definition of homelessness was 2.7% of students in the state. According to the Colorado Department of Education, Adams County, with seven (7) school districts accounted for 3,917 or 16.35% of the state total. Jefferson County School District reported 2,733 homeless students or 11.41% of the state total. The two counties Westminster rests within account for a staggering 27.76% of all identified homeless students in the state of Colorado.

For the 2015-16 school year, the three school districts serving Westminster reported the following data:

- Adams 12 Five Star Schools had 1,668 homeless students of 39,287, or 4.2% of its total student body;
- Jefferson County Public Schools had 2,733 homeless students of 86,698, or 3.2% of its total student body; and
- Westminster Public Schools had 1,065 homeless students of 9,500, or 11.2% of its total student body.

This is a total of 5,466 pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade students meeting the Department of Education's definition of homelessness in the three school districts serving Westminster. The City's portion, based on manual counts from the districts, is roughly 1,000 homeless pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade students. However, for the most part, with the exception of unaccompanied youth, there is at least one guardian and often a younger than school age child or older sibling who has been pulled out of school. This demonstrates another known likely undercount.

THE SCOPE OF HOMELESSNESS

ACROSS THE NATION

Based on the 2017 Point-in-Time count, HUD identified 553,742 people experiencing homelessness. This was an increase of 3,814 people from 2016. On average, 17 out of 10,000 people in the United States were counted as living outdoors, in a place paid for by an agency, or

in a place not intended for human habitation such as a vehicle. Nationwide, 114,829 homeless people were children under the age of 18 and 53,438 were under the age of 24.

> "Half of all people experiencing homelessness did so in one of five states: California (25% or 134,278 people); New York (16% or 89,503 people); Florida (6% or 32,190 people); Texas (4% or 23,548 people); or Washington (4% or 21,112 people). California and New York, the states with the largest numbers of people experiencing homelessness, also had high rates of homelessness, 34 and 45 people per 10,000," according to the 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.

IN COLORADO

The State of Colorado, on the other hand, accounted for just under 2% of the HUD national total in the 2017 Point-in-Time count identifying 10,940 people experiencing homelessness. Of those, 2,119 were under the age of 18 with another 192 between the ages of 18 and 24. Again, the PIT has limitations and does not reflect the almost 24,000 students the Department of Education regards as homeless in Colorado. Of the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Colorado last year in the PIT, 1,078 were veterans and 1,662 self-identified as victims of domestic violence.

The three subpopulations with the largest numbers living in unsheltered conditions in Colorado were:

- 824 or 7.5% who were severely mentally ill
- 629 or 5.7% who were victims of domestic violence
- 561 or 5.1% who had a chronic substance abuse problem

The MDHI PIT 2017 count, identified 5,116 individuals who are homeless or 46.7% of the state total, as being in the seven (7) counties of the Denver metro area:

County	Homeless Individuals
Adams	157
Arapahoe	562
Boulder	600
Broomfield	22
Denver	3,336
Douglas	45
Jefferson	394
MDHI CoC Total	**5,116**

Of those, 924 or 18.1% were living in unsheltered conditions, 2,172 were staying in transitional housing, and 1,965 were housed in an emergency shelter with 31 in a safe haven and 24 in a domestic violence shelter. This last figure is particularly concerning because 507 or 12.6% of those who participated in the PIT survey listed domestic violence as a contributing factor to their homelessness.

There were 569 veterans who were homeless in the Denver metro area, with 72 of them living in unsheltered conditions. Only eight (8) were identified in Adams County with four (4) found in Jefferson County. From what service providers know of the clients they serve, the veteran subpopulation is believed to be significantly undercounted in both counties. When asked about disabling conditions, 300 veterans in the Denver metro area who were homeless identified as having some form of disability.

Of the respondents, 439 were individuals who indicated they had families with children under the age of 18 living as homeless at the time of the survey.

ADAMS AND JEFFERSON COUNTIES

Digging into the data specific to Adams and Jefferson Counties, the 2017 PIT shows 303 total households experiencing homelessness in the two counties. These households include 551 people, 45.4% are female, 53.2% are male and 0.4% are transgender. Of these 303 households, 87 included children. The total number of people in households with children was 326 for an average family size of 3.7. Of the survey respondents, 166 or 54.8% said that one or more members of their households had received money for work in the last month.

When asked about the duration of their homelessness, 33 respondents indicated they had been homeless for less than one (1) month. More than two-thirds of respondents indicated they had been homeless for more than a month but less than three years, with 102 or 33.7% saying one (1) month to one (1) year and 109 or 36% saying one (1) year to three (3) years. Those who indicated they were homeless for more than three (3) years totaled 55 or 18.2% of responding households in the two counties.

With all the limitations mentioned about the PIT, it does provide insight into the contributing factors of homelessness. When asked, "what reasons or factors contributed to homelessness or experiencing housing instability?," respondents identified the items in the table below.

Contributing factors of homelessness	Total	Percentage
Unable to pay rent/mortgage	121	39.9%
Relationship problems or family break up	73	24.1%
Unable to pay utilities	72	23.8%
Alcohol or substance abuse	68	22.4%
Lost job/couldn't find work	65	21.5%
Abuse or violence in home	56	18.5%
Asked to leave	56	18.5%
Mental illness	48	15.8%
Bad credit	37	12.2%
Family member or personal illness	36	11.9%
Discharged from jail	29	9.6%
Legal problems	24	7.9%
Moved to find work	24	7.9%
Discharged from foster care	10	3.3%
Medical expenses	10	3.3%
Problems with public benefits	10	3.3%
Discharged from prison	9	3.0%
Related to sexual orientation	3	1.0%

Three of the top five contributing factors were financial: unable to pay rent or mortgage, unable to pay utilities, lost job and/or could not find work. Respondents were allowed to select all factors that applied to their situation.

IN WESTMINSTER

Roughly 100 unsheltered homeless individuals and 1,000 homeless pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade students reside in Westminster, according to HUD's PIT count and the Department of Education, respectively. In addition, the student number needs to be multiplied by an unknown factor to acknowledge that there is usually at least one guardian, a younger sibling not yet school age and/or an older sibling pulled out of school to help the family members survive. At the same time, a portion of the student count includes those families who have more than one school-age child attending school so it is difficult to determine what the multiplier factor should be.

There are also a couple of additional pieces of data that are specific to Westminster: police field interviews and fire emergency medical service (EMS) calls.

In 2017, police conducted 285 field interviews with those who identified as homeless, an increase of 62.8% since the figure first started being tracked in 2014.

In 2017, Fire EMS calls clearly involving someone who was homeless totaled 167, an increase of 87.6% since the figure first started being tracked in 2014.

Although it is possible some of these interactions were duplications, it is not likely to account for a large percentage as the police field interviews do not generally involve Fire emergency calls. Since it is not always clear that a police or fire interaction involves someone who is homeless, it is possible these counts are also underestimates. These numbers do reflect the need to partner with other municipalities in determining the costs of maintaining EMS services. First, though, other jurisdictions would need to be tracking calls in the same way. Average costs per interaction would also need to be agreed upon. Only then could the jurisdictions look at creating a social impact bond to help bring more services for the homeless into Adams and Jefferson Counties.

WHO ARE WESTMINSTER'S HOMELESS?

As shown in the data above, many homeless persons include families with school-age children. Largely, they are homeless because of financial reasons. While many aspects contribute to family homelessness, locally the lack of affordable housing has been a major contributing factor. Nationally, the most common reason a family becomes homeless is because they have a child with special needs or a disability, which results in severe financial strain on these families. This often makes childcare cost-prohibitive to allow both or even one parent to work. It can also drive up housing costs if universal design for those needing accessibility is required. Children with disabilities almost certainly drive up medical costs, leaving less money available for housing.

As the National Coalition for the Homeless points out in a 2017 report, "homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked." The rise of suburban poverty in the United States since 2000 contributes to this disturbing trend of increasing family homelessness:

"A key feature of the growth of suburban poverty in the 2000s is that it was not isolated to particular regions or parts of the country. Almost every major metro area experienced a significant increase in the suburban poor population between 2000 and 2015, and two-thirds of those regions now find the majority of the poor population in the suburbs. Some of the steepest upticks occurred in fast-growing metro areas in the Sun Belt and Intermountain West, like the Cape Coral (151 percent), Austin (129 percent), Atlanta (126 percent), and Las Vegas (139 percent) metro areas, each of which saw its suburban poor population more than double." (Kneebone, 2017).

According to the United States American Community Survey, the poverty rate in Westminster doubled in the first 15 years of the current century, rising from 4,726 individuals or 4.7% of the population in 2000, to 9,942 individuals or 9.0% of the population in 2015. It is important to note

that this poverty rate is still lower than the Adams County, Colorado, poverty rate of 12.9% and the U.S. poverty rate of 15.1% while slightly higher than the Jefferson County, Colorado, poverty rate of 8.1%. Nevertheless, this doubling of the City's poverty rate likely contributed to the rise in family homelessness in the area.

Nationwide trends listed in the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness plan, Opening Doors (2015), highlight major contributing factors to homelessness in Westminster:

> "The increase in homelessness since the 1980s was the result of a convergence of several key factors: the loss of affordable housing and increase in foreclosures; wages and public assistance that have not kept pace with rising housing costs and the cost of living, in part as a result of job loss and underemployment, and resulting debt; and the closing of state psychiatric institutions without the concomitant creation of sufficient community-based housing and services. The rapid increase in income inequality that began during the 1980s has contributed to changes in local housing markets, driving up the cost of renting even a modest home or apartment. Housing affordability problems and homelessness tend to be greatest in communities with higher levels of income inequality." (p. 14).

Based on conversations the police officers and Parks, Recreation and Library Staff have with homeless persons meeting HUD's definition of "living in places not intended for human habitation," a little over half of the estimated 100 homeless are from the area. They often have family members in the general vicinity and do not want to move away from them, even though they are frequently not healthy family ties. The other half is usually moving through the area, often between Denver and Boulder, camping less than a week in Westminster.

There are no firm numbers on how many of those who are homeless in Westminster are Veterans. As noted above, the veteran count for the 2017 PIT in both Adams and Jefferson counties is significantly lower than service providers believe based on client interactions. Supporting this, the Irving Street Library goes through many flyers from the Volunteers of America Intake Coordinator for Homeless Veterans than most other sites in Colorado, outside of those operated by the Veterans Administration.

The three primary subpopulations of homelessness currently identified in Westminster are: families, individuals who grew up in the area or have lived here for most of their lives, and those moving through the area. It is the latter two groups most likely to generate calls to the police and fire departments as they are more visible than the families who are often doubled- or tripled-up. If living outdoors, the families usually keep to themselves instead of forming an informal community with others who are homeless unlike other homeless individuals.

SERVICES AND GAPS

Services exist in Adams and Jefferson Counties for families who are homeless. Unfortunately, most have few openings or the capacity to help and demand for services is ever-increasing. For

instance, in 2016, Almost Home received requests from 535 Westminster residents for a total of $293,909 in rental assistance or vouchers. They were able to meet the need of a few with $13,383, a shortfall of $280,526.

In Adams and Jefferson Counties, shelter beds are available at:

- Access Housing in Commerce City with 18 shelter beds for families.
- The Action Center with 22 shelter beds.
- Almost Home in Brighton with 30 shelter beds for families.
- Cold Weather Cares with 20 shelter beds, including 8 for singles. Open every night from mid-October through April.
- Comitis Crisis Center in Aurora with up to 139 shelter beds for singles and families. Open on severe weather weeks.
- Family Promise with 15 shelter beds.
- The Family Shelter with 35 beds for families open every night from December 1 to March 31 and only on severe weather nights from mid-October to November 30 and from April 1 to mid-April.
- Growing Home with 14 transitional shelter beds for families.
- Severe Weather Collaborative with 30 shelter beds for singles. Open only on severe weather nights from mid-October through mid-April.

There are also two domestic violence shelters, open only to women with children:

- The Family Tree Domestic Violence Shelter with 30 beds.
- Rising Hope with 6 shelter beds.

In total, there are 359 shelter beds between the two counties when it is a severely cold night, meeting the criteria of less than 30-degrees Fahrenheit with precipitation or 20-degrees or less and dry. When those conditions are not met, there are 155 beds between mid-October and mid-April or only 135 available throughout the entire year. Even with the likely underestimate in the Point-in-Time count in both counties, in 2017 there were not enough shelter beds for the 551 homeless people who were counted. While Denver has significantly more shelter beds, there is enough demand for these spaces that the downtown Denver shelters only allow persons who show Denver as their last permanent residence to stay more than one night.

An additional complicating matter is that the openings service providers in Adams and Jefferson Counties do have may not be a good fit for the person needing assistance at that moment. All services available in the sections of Adams and Jefferson Counties nearest Westminster focus almost exclusively on families with children. There are only eight (8) shelter beds available for singles. Those are through Cold Weather Cares, open from mid-October through mid-April. That organization only admits people who pass a background check and will clearly benefit from case management within 90 days. None of the shelters in Adams or Jefferson counties accept people without passing background checks with the exception of Comitis Crisis Center, located in Aurora. That shelter is 31 minutes away by car and more than two hours away by bus from Westminster.

This creates a challenging situation: with no services available for individuals who cannot pass a background check within 5 miles of Westminster, there is no place to connect these individuals for assistance. Yet, in Westminster as in other cities, these individuals largely generate emergency service calls and calls and emails from other citizens who do not feel safe because homeless persons are becoming more visible throughout the suburbs than they were five years ago, according to innumerable news articles from across the United States.

No shelter beds are available for couples without children anywhere in the Denver metropolitan area, resulting in many couples deciding to live in their vehicles or outdoors together. There is only one domestic violence shelter that accepts women without children and it is located in Boulder. If this shelter is full, women fleeing domestic violence frequently find themselves living in either vehicles or outdoors.

An increasing concern among service providers in Adams and Jefferson Counties is the need for day shelters. These sites often offer showers, laundry services, breakfast, lunch, snacks and computers for job searches.

Growing Home operates a day shelter in unincorporated Adams County for the families in its rotating church shelter. The parents of the families they serve typically work. On their days off, though, they had no place to stay and watch their children until the day shelter opened within the last two years. Cold Weather Cares recognized this as a problem for the 20 who take shelter with them in their church rotational shelter. Consequently, Cold Weather Cares now operates a day shelter for those registered with their organization. The City of Aurora opened a day shelter in mid-2017.

Mental health clinicians in both Adams and Jefferson Counties are willing to participate in ongoing street outreach work; however, neither Community Reach Center nor the Jefferson Center for Mental Health currently have the capacity to regularly interact with people living outdoors. Conversations have been held on how to make this possibility a reality.

STEREOTYPES AND MISPERCEPTIONS SURROUNDING HOMELESSNESS

PANHANDLING OR BEGGING

While the definitions of homelessness vary, it is the perception that many people hold in their minds that influence how the public thinks about those who are homeless. Many people associate panhandling with homelessness. While there is a correlation, with some people who are homeless standing on street corners, holding signs, asking for money, many people engaged in that activity are not, in fact, homeless.

"Panhandling is thus a labor market phenomenon - it is defined by what you do to get money when you are awake. It is distinct from homelessness, which is a housing market phenomenon - defined by where you sleep. Often colloquial usage confuses the two conditions…In New York City, a very small fraction of homeless people panhandle, and many panhandlers are not homeless." (Dordick, p. 4).

The same is true in the Denver metro area.

MENTAL ILLNESS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Another common misperception of homelessness is that most people without homes have mental or behavioral health issues and/or are abusing one or more substances. It is true that a higher percentage of the homeless community do have mental, behavioral or substance abuse issues than that of the housed population. It is also true that it is not the majority of those who are homeless.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), an estimated 46% of homeless persons live with severe mental illness and/or substance use disorders. Compare that to NAMI's estimated "1 in 5 adults in the U.S. …experiences mental illness in a given year". The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, found that "among the 20.2 million adults in the U.S. who experienced a substance use disorder, 50.5% - 10.2 million adults - had a co-occurring mental illness."

As the PIT 2017 Adams and Jefferson County data suggests, mental illness and substance abuse certainly play a role locally. While they are contributing factors, though, they should not be mistaken for determining factors. In fact, most people with mental or behavioral health disorders and/or substance abuse issues remain housed. For those who do not, it is quite likely that other factors contributed to the lack of housing, including a social network that was not strong or supportive enough. Systems to assist people in transitioning to housing must take this into consideration.

Case workers who have worked with clients who were on the verge of homelessness not demonstrating any signs of mental illness report that within two weeks of losing shelter, the clients begin to show symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This suggests homelessness may actually cause some mental health issues.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Solving the issue of homelessness requires a multifaceted approach designed for assisting each individual or family to transition to stable housing as quickly as possible.

First, an operational definition of ending homelessness must be identified. The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the coalition of nineteen (19) U.S. agencies that play a role in reducing or ending homelessness on a federal level, adopted this definition in 2015:

"Operational Definition of an End to Homelessness

Progress in communities and across the nation over the last few years has affirmed that an end to homelessness is an achievable goal and can be measured. A clear definition of what an end to homelessness means, supported by specific metrics, will ensure that Federal, state, and local partners are working towards a shared vision and goal.

Definition:

An end to homelessness does not mean that no one will ever experience a housing crisis again. Changing economic realities, the unpredictability of life, and unsafe or unwelcoming family environments may create situations where individuals, families, or youth could experience, re-experience, or be at risk of homelessness.

An end to homelessness means that every community will have a systematic response in place that ensures homelessness is prevented whenever possible or is otherwise a rare, brief, and non-recurring experience.

Specifically, every community will have the capacity to:

- Quickly identify and engage people at risk of and experiencing homelessness.
- Intervene to prevent the loss of housing and divert people from entering the homelessness services system.
- Provide immediate access to shelter and crisis services, without barriers to entry, while permanent stable housing and appropriate supports are being secured.
- When homelessness does occur, quickly connect people to housing assistance and services—tailored to their unique needs and strengths—to help them achieve and maintain stable housing." (p. 10).

With this in mind, OneHome, the coordinated entry portion of MDHI, adopted the following vision:

"OneHome is a coordinated entry system to ensure individuals, families, youth, and Veterans experiencing homelessness will have timely access to appropriate resources through a centralized, equitable, person-centered process that preserves choice and dignity.

Guiding Principles

1. Our community supports a client-centered, low-barrier approach to housing that ensures that the needs and well-being of those experiencing homelessness are paramount, and increases self-determination for the client.
2. Our system will operationalize a shared community vision across the seven-county metro area with clear priorities and community ownership.
3. We must use real-time data to drive our decision making, goal setting, and resource allocation.
4. The process must be transparent with expectations and outcomes regularly to all stakeholders, including housing service providers and clients.
5. The system must be accessible to all and able to prioritize those most in need within different populations for available and appropriate services based on a common assessment tool or tools.
6. Through coordination, our system targets appropriate resources by ensuring that every individual and family and youth is linked to the most relevant housing intervention.
7. Our collaborative effort focuses on long-term outcomes including sustainability and support for both providers and clients in housing retention."

WESTMINSTER'S ROLE

Westminster can sometimes lead but always engage in regional discussions about what it means to end homelessness locally.

CURRENT WESTMINSTER HOMELESS INITIATIVES

While homelessness is clearly a regional issue, the City of Westminster can take steps towards its elimination unilaterally or through one-on-one partnerships. The City homelessness initiatives that are currently underway are detailed below.

1. Through the Human Services Board, fund the following homeless service providers and/or food banks: Access Housing, Almost Home, The Family Tree, Growing Home, Cold Weather Cares, The Arvada Food Bank, Have a Heart, Westminster F.I.S.H. plus more than twenty (20) other non-profits.
2. Providing funding through the Invest Health grant from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Reinvestment Fund for the food banks in the southern portion of the City to share a van to reduce waste of fresh food.
3. Also through the Invest Health grant, contributing funds to assist with the transportation and literacy needs of homeless students attending Westminster Public Schools.
4. The Irving Street Library serves as a host site for a mobile assessor from the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) to conduct Vulnerability Index - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) surveys one Monday afternoon a month.
5. Informed the Westminster Public Schools Homeless Liaison so she can refer families and unaccompanied youth to the Irving Street Library for VI-SPDATs.
6. Affordable Housing Study presented to City Council on October 23, 2017.

7. Building more affordable housing throughout the City.
8. Hiring a Housing Coordinator.
9. Surveyed faith-based institutions to determine what services they currently offer and what their capacity and/or interest is in future offerings.
10. Participate in Point-in-Time count annually. In 2018, hosted a magnet event at the Swim and Fitness Center. Warm meals, showers, haircuts, medical checks and a wide variety of incentives were available. The goal is to gain a more accurate count of those who are unsheltered homeless in the City. Coordinated with Jefferson County, Adams County, and MDHI, taking a unified regional approach.
11. Recruiting more hotels and motels to accept vouchers in Jefferson and Adams counties.
12. Now offering motel vouchers for the Adams County side of Westminster.
13. Fostering conversations around forming mobile homeless outreach teams in Jefferson County.
14. Offer Mental Health First Aid trainings to staff; advertise publicly available ones to citizens and businesses.
15. Participated in the JeffCo Mental Health First Aid Collaborative.
16. Created a new Internal Homeless Task Force to offer training, communication to the public and business community about homeless initiatives in the City. Please see the list of current employees serving on this Task Force at the end of this report.
17. Participate in the Adams County Food Access Collaborative, the Start by Believing Campaign, Healthy JeffCo, and JeffCo Thrives to support initiatives taking pro-active approaches to reducing trauma and its effects within the community.
18. Partially fund detox centers.
19. Created and maintain the Westy Live Better! website to simplify finding Westminster services for low-income community members (https://www.cityofwestminster.us/LiveBetter).
20. Created a Resource Guide in 2010 (called Resources for Those in Need). Update regularly. Police, Fire, Council, Recreation Centers, Libraries and the Court distribute as needed.
21. Training City leadership and Staff on homelessness and its many variables.
22. Serve on the Adams County Community Enrichment Steering Committee.
23. Ensure local non-profits are notified of federal and other grant opportunities to help them build capacity.
24. Collaborate regionally through: The Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI), One Home, the Adams County Coalition for the Homeless, Jefferson County Heading Home, Severe Weather Shelter Network, the Cold Weather Cares Advisory Board, and the Heading Home Governance Group.
25. Organizations regularly meeting with Westminster Staff include: Access Housing, Adams County Housing Authority, Almost Home, The Burnes Center on Poverty and Homelessness, The Family Tree, Growing Home, Human Services in both counties, school districts' homeless liaisons, other municipalities, and faith-based organizations in both counties.
26. At the Westminster Everyone Counts event, asked guests to also take a one-page survey asking four (4) questions on how Westminster could better serve them. Sixteen (16) guests submitted their responses. This information will help guide the direction Staff brings to City Council in the near future.

Throughout the last year, Staff has compiled a list of recommended solutions key stakeholders, including those who are homeless, have identified.

Staff is currently researching the costs of the suggested solutions to address homelessness and to provide specific services. The solutions that provide the best fit to Westminster's specific homeless populations and/or regional initiatives will be brought before City Council as part of the 2019/2020 budget cycle.

Prioritization will be given to the options that have demonstrated long-term solutions to homelessness by successfully transitioning people out of homelessness in other states, cities, and counties. Those solutions invariably are linked by trauma-informed care, case management, and permanent supportive housing.

Outside of the budget cycle, Staff will seek City Council direction on housing solutions below 30% of Area Median Income, including church sheltering options, in the second quarter of 2018.

2017-2018 Westminster Homeless Task Force Members

Dave Cantu, Street Operations Manager, Public Works & Utilities

Holly Clayton, Lead Housing Inspector, Community Development

Candyce Cline, Associate Municipal Court Judge, General Services

Dave Frankel, City Attorney, City Attorney's Office

Larry Garlick, Information Technical Services Administrator, IT

Matt Gosselin, Senior Police Officer, Police Department

Jenni Grafton, Economic Development Administrator, Economic Development

Brian Grucelski, Facilities Manager, General Services

Bill Hayward, Foreman, Public Works & Utilities

Amy Johnson, Senior Planner, Community Development

Marina Miller, Senior Human Resources Analyst, Human Resources

Greg Moser, Emergency Management Coordinator, Fire Department

Alexa Priddy, Community & Outreach Coordinator, City Manager's Office

Kate Skarbek, Senior Management Analyst, Parks, Recreation & Libraries

Aaron Stafford, Crewleader, Parks, Recreation & Libraries

Tina Takahashi, Lieutenant – EMS Field Coordinator, Fire Department

Stephanie Troller, Economic Development Administrator, Economic Development

Mike Wazny, Police Officer, Police Department

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