

HOMELESS: Children are among those without adequate housing

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housing, at meal sites and food banks, drop-in centers, health clinics, hotels/motels, campsites, RV parks, and through street canvassing for a Point In Time Count of the homeless. In Sisters the count was done at the FAN office, the Cold Weather Shelter, the food banks, and by outreach around town.

Precariously housed means not living in permanent housing, i.e. couch surfing. Unsheltered means living in a car, RV without full hookup, or outdoors.

The average age of respondents was 31.7, with the oldest being 79 and the youngest a newborn. Adult males accounted for 43 percent, adult females for 28 percent, male children 15 percent, female children 13 percent, and trans/other of any age one percent.

The total reported in Sisters was 69 people, up from 50 in 2017. Of those 69, 48 percent were unsheltered, 39 percent were precariously housed, and 13 percent were sheltered. Six reported they were homeless due to domestic violence, 11 were chronically homeless, and veterans and unaccompanied youth both accounted for less than five people each.

Economic reasons were cited as the primary cause of homelessness in Sisters (55), with family or health issues, violence/abuse, and legal issues cited as other reasons.

Adult with children families are the most common homeless population in Sisters at 61 percent of respondents. Single adults represent 30 percent, and families with multiple adults only account for nine percent.

The key findings in Sisters from the 2018 Point In Time Count indicate that most respondents have some earned income. In other words, they are employed but unable to afford permanent housing. Many are domestic violence survivors. Some have been homeless for over three years and have a persistent mental illness (HUD chronic homeless definition).

The Sisters Cold Weather Shelter opens November 1 at the Sisters Community Church Hangar Annex. During November, it will be open on nights the temperature is forecast to be 32 degrees or colder, offering dinner, breakfast, and a safe warm place to sleep. Beginning in December, the shelter will be open every night starting at 6 p.m.

Ponderosa Heights

Apartments, a project of Housing Works, just completed taking applications from qualified people for the lottery for their new low-income apartments located on Brooks Camp Road.

Mosaic Medical is currently negotiating bringing their medical van to Sisters one night a week.

Many of the short-term goals established by the Community Action Team have been accomplished, including a Sisters Cleanup Day involving trash on public lands. It was discovered that a percentage of the trash was not due to homeless camps but rather illegal dumping of construction debris by two local builders.

The City is retrofitting the coin machines in the Village Green showers to accept tokens that will be available through FAN. The educational presentation was made before the Council to make them aware of the circumstances surrounding homelessness and to encourage them in their efforts to address homelessness and the lack of sufficient affordable housing in Sisters.

The committee is investigating the possibility of providing subsidies to families living in RVs but lacking proper hookup facilities. The subsidies would allow them to rent a space for the winter in an RV park, which would also provide them with laundry and shower facilities.

Those who would like to join in the effort to alleviate homelessness in Sisters may contact George Myers at HLC@gmars.com or visit cohomeless.org.

Camping supplies, including tarps and propane, and warm clothing are always welcome and can be dropped off at the Habitat office above the Thrift Store. To volunteer as a monitor at the shelter or to provide a meal, contact volunteer coordinator Joann Rundell at joann.rundell@gmail.com.

Perspectives on homelessness

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

Those who find themselves without permanent housing in Sisters have to do the best they can to get by, regardless of the weather. Many citizens think there isn't any homelessness in Sisters. Two local women share their own experience interacting with those who are unhoused.

Zoe Schumacher, the public services supervisor at the Sisters branch of the Deschutes County Library, is someone who is very familiar with those who find themselves homeless in Sisters.

"At the Sisters library, we typically see a dozen regular 'homeless or at risk' folks on a daily basis," she said. "These folks are often waiting outside for us to open in the morning and stay with us the entire day until closing. They can be seen sitting on the benches as we drive away in the evening. During the summer months when it is hot and harsh winter months, we can see this number significantly increase sometimes by as much as 30 people at any given time."

"One challenge for us is being able to refer these folks to resources, as the resources do not exist locally in Sisters. The nearest are often in Bend or Redmond. Another challenge is addressing the perception of library users who do not understand or have knowledge of the issues surrounding homelessness. I feel there is an education piece that needs to happen as we address 'homelessness' in our community."

Ashley Reed Okura, life-long resident of Sisters and a local business owner, said that "over the years, there has been a noticeable increase of people living in the woods, both by choice and by circumstance."

At the Best Western

Ponderosa Lodge, Okura stated there are tents in a homeless camp visible from the lodge.

"I have noticed amenities typically reserved for guests — guest laundry machines, continental breakfast, swimming pool and hot tub, and ice — have been utilized by campers," she noted.

She voiced concern about the lack of affordable housing in Sisters and the increasing number of vacation rentals, making it difficult to retain employees who can't afford to live where they work.

She sees more affordable housing units and fewer short-term rentals on the market as a partial solution, so rental units are available to long-term renters. Okura would also like to see a more permanent shelter offering those who are homeless a warm place to stay, do laundry, and take showers, as well as other amenities.

"I believe Sisters can help improve conditions for our neighbors camping in the woods, but acknowledgment amongst our community is the first step," Okura concluded.

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