

Bend homeless count changes amid virus

By **BRENNA VISSER**
The Bulletin

Some central Oregon social service providers are worried the number of homeless people will be underreported because of federal COVID-19 guidelines limiting interaction between the homeless and the volunteers who tally them in the annual Point-in-Time Count.

Each year, Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties participate in the federally-mandated Point-in-Time count, where volunteers count the number of people experiencing homelessness or are in transitional housing on one day in January. The national effort offers a snapshot of how many people are experiencing homelessness in a region and often is tied to funding for homeless services.

But the coronavirus pandemic is shaking up how this count is usually run. In response to guidelines from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, local governments and nonprofit organizations are asked to limit interactions between homeless people and volunteers by having fewer volunteers. Across the country, the pandemic has led several areas to delay, or even cancel the Point-in-Time count altogether.

In Deschutes County, it was tradition to advertise and hold large events that offered food to bring people to one place to take the survey. Those large events aren't safe to hold anymore, said Colleen Thomas, the homeless services coordinator for the county.

So this year, the region will rely on homeless service providers and nonprofits to do the count over a 10-day period, which began last week and will end on Friday, and ask people whether they were homeless the night of Jan. 20 to main-



John Lodise with the Shepherd's House Ministries in Bend helps Judy Vacha fill out a form for the annual Point-In-Time count of people who identify as homeless in 2016.

tain consistency. Service providers will use an app instead of paper surveys to capture demographic information, Thomas said.

"We, as in the (Homeless Leadership Coalition), decided to move forward because we recognized the importance of the data," Thomas said.

But some service providers, including Thomas, fear these changes could lead the homeless population to be undercounted more than usual.

Service providers for years have warned that the Point-in-Time count already underrepresents the number of homeless people in an area because it only shows data for what people were doing on one night in January.

But with fewer volunteers and more reliance on service providers to capture data from people spread out for miles all over rural parts of the county, counting could be more difficult.

COVID-19 regulations around gatherings have also complicated the counting effort. For example, the Family Kitchen — a nonprofit that serves meals to homeless people — shifted from indoor dining to to-go meals since the pandemic hit.

In a more usual year during the Point-in-Time count, people are hanging out for longer, which means there is more chance for someone to take the survey, said Donna Burklo, the program director at Family Kitchen.

With to-go meals, the only chance service providers have to talk to someone is while they are outside in line for food.

"There's a lot less opportunity to build up any rapport," Burklo said. "I do think that's going to make it pretty difficult."

Undercounting is an issue because federal and state funding is often tied to Point-in-Time count numbers. A lower number could make it look like the region needs fewer resources, according to social service providers.

"I personally have concerns that an undercount may appear that homelessness is not a concern in our region, which in fact is the exact opposite," Thomas said in an email. "Not only

does the PIT count affect potential funding streams, it gives a voice to those wanting to tell their story and helps to educate the greater public about the scope and barriers those experiencing homelessness in our community are facing."

Stacey Witte, the executive director of the homeless outreach nonprofit REACH, said she is concerned homeless people will be undercounted more than usual because of the COVID-19 restrictions. She fears a lower count could impact getting grants to fund housing programs, which would "impact all of us."

This year in particular is also harder than usual for homeless residents, too, she said.

"They are in such (a) cri-

sis. The last thing on their mind is to fill out an intake, understandably," Witte said.

Thomas said that of course the county will always have the concern about funding, but said HUD will give regions an opportunity to provide explanation.

"Since all of the counties in our region are also still in the extreme high risk category in relation to COVID-19, they will take into consideration that along with how we report what our implementation of the survey has been this year," Thomas said in an email.

But some service providers are optimistic about the count this year.

John Lodise, the director of emergency services for Shepherd's House Ministries who runs the warming shelter, said traditionally the number of people who show up at the warming shelter tends to be lower around the time the county is doing the PIT count — possibly to avoid being asked to do the survey.

But this year the count time has landed on a particularly cold and snowy week, bringing more people to the shelter, and thus more people to count, he said.

Molly Heiss, the director of housing stabilization for the nonprofit NeighborImpact, said she thinks this year has the potential to produce a higher count than usual.

She believes this because homeless residents already know and trust the service providers who are asking them to take a survey, versus having unknown volunteers coming into their camp.

Usually, the region has trouble counting people who are chronically homeless because they are reticent to take the survey, she said.

"I think the more visibility and trust we build, the more likely we are to count the more chronically homeless," Heiss said.

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