

Media Advisory – Jan. 30, 2009

Contact: Christopher Schwarzen

Office: 425-388-3883

Email: Christopher.Schwarzen@snoco.org

Homeless count results show slight increase

Early results in the annual Point in Time homeless count show an increase in the number of people in Snohomish County without a permanent place to stay.

During Thursday's count, more than 200 people spent the day and early evening gathering data on Snohomish County's homeless population. This year's total – still incomplete – was 2,202, compared to last year's final count of about 2,154, which included an estimated 625 homeless individuals who were children under the age of 18.

In 2006, there were 2,626 people counted as homeless and in 2005, about 2,500 people claimed they did not have a home.

“With today's economic crisis, we expected to see higher numbers and fear those numbers may continue increasing if we don't find more permanent solutions soon,” Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon said.

Numbers for 2009 initially can be divided into two categories. Those staying in shelters and transitional housing the night of the count totaled 1,217. Another 985 homeless were surveyed on the street without a place to stay.

County staff will spend the next two months closely studying and finalizing data from the Point in Time count, comparing numbers and demographics collected during past years while looking for trends. Totals are expected to increase slightly in the coming weeks as individual agencies that helped collect numbers finish reporting their results.

Specifically, the county is reviewing additional information related to a person's disability status, the number of episodes of homelessness and the duration.

“Statistics gathered also will help the county determine how different populations are affected by homelessness, including single mothers with children, those with mental-health and chemical-dependency issues, as well as veterans,” said Ken Stark, Snohomish County's Human Services director.

The difference between 2008 and 2009 numbers likely is the result of increasing economic issues facing individuals and families living in the Puget Sound and across the nation.

Last year's count also was conducted during a smaller time period and in colder weather than this year.

The Point in Time count is a state and federal requirement; the results help ensure that vital federal and state funding continues to come into the community to fight homelessness. Data from the annual count also is used to understand how widespread homelessness is in Snohomish County and who is most affected.

Based on last year's numbers and the work of Reardon's Housing & Homelessness Policy Oversight Committee, the County Council is considering legislation that would increase support for nonprofits purchasing affordable housing for low-income residents through the county's loan guarantee program.

The county has the capacity to offer up to \$40 million in loan guarantees for nonprofits and public housing authorities. This credit enhancement can play a significant role in both securing a loan and reducing the interest rate for the loan. Nearly \$35 million of the \$40 million already has been committed to projects.

Reardon has asked the Council to increase the loan guarantee limit to \$100 million, which will provide increased opportunity for nonprofits to preserve, purchase or build new affordable housing.

"Increasing the available limit to enhance additional loans will provide a significant boost to reaching our affordable housing goals," Reardon said last week. "This is a way for the county to partner with our community stakeholders and to increase their buying power at no cost to taxpayers."

In 2006, the county approved the "Everyone At Home Now" report, a strategy for ending homelessness here by 2016. The plan calls for the expansion of homeless housing coupled with support services and for the development of programs geared toward specific groups.

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