

Last month's census shows 1,069 homeless in county

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Preliminary results from last month's Thurston County Homeless Census show there were 1,069 people without housing in the county in 2009, an increase from 722 people in the final tally in 2008.

Housing providers are bracing for the worst — that a bad economy will drive even more people into homelessness. They, along with social-service providers in general, are balancing fears about funding cuts and service reductions with optimism that they might receive money from a federal stimulus package being considered by Congress. They don't yet know how much aid they could receive, or when.

And they fear homelessness will continue to rise.

"We just have a sense that the tsunami wave hasn't hit," said Theresa Slusher, community services division manager for the Housing Authority of Thurston County.

In this year's homeless census, more people reported that they were being served in transitional housing — 286 in the preliminary count, compared with 161 in the final tally last year. Transitional housing is more stable than emergency shelters and is intended to move people toward permanent housing.

Selena Kilmoyer, who runs the Out of the Woods Shelter for families in west Olympia, said she sees people who have been left homeless for the first time because of the economic downturn.

"These folks are ill-equipped," she said. "They don't know how to navigate the system" for social services.

Service cuts

Cuts loom to programs that help homeless residents. The Bread and Roses Advocacy Center, 1009 Fourth Ave. E., will close in April because officials didn't apply for some funding this year. The center has been a place where the homeless could get case management, work on resumes, use the telephone and pick up mail. After the center closes, Bread and Roses will continue to offer homeless services through outreach.

Behavioral Health Resources, a nonprofit agency that serves patients on Medicaid who are chemically dependent and mentally ill, announced last month that it expects to cut its Medicaid budget to Thurston and Mason counties by about 10 percent for the next five months, the result of funding cuts.

Thurston County eliminated its \$112,000 contribution to the Human Services Review Council for 2009 because of the county's budget shortfall. The council, made up of multiple jurisdictions in Thurston County, distributes aid to service providers.

Homeless capacity

Olympia has an assortment of housing options for the homeless that stay at or near capacity. And capacity is expected to remain about the same this year, said Ruth Gutierrez, housing program specialist with the housing authority.

Last year's full homeless census report said there were 745 beds available for 445 households. Not all of the beds can be used because families occupy some of those spaces, and family sizes vary.

Among the 745 beds available were 203 emergency shelter beds, defined as housing that is available for up to 90 days. The Salvation Army was one of the biggest providers, with 42 beds for men, 16 for women and 30 for families with children.

There were 372 beds for transitional housing, which allows a stay of as long as two years. An example is Drexel House, a nearly two-year-old facility on Devoe Street that has 25 transitional beds for men and women in addition to shelter and permanent beds.

There were 170 beds available in the county defined as permanent supportive beds, with limits on length of stay. A facility that offers such beds is The Gardens in Tumwater; it has 34 beds.

Addressing the issue

Pam Toal, executive director of United Way of Thurston County, said her organization found in a recent survey that nonprofit groups either had sustained cuts or were expecting them in 2009.

About 130 people attended a United Way community forum last week at First United Methodist Church in Olympia, Toal said.

During the three-hour forum, organizers took an inventory of community needs.

In brainstorming sessions, they identified a number of concerns about homelessness: There isn't enough shelter capacity or supportive housing and services. Zoning laws restrict tent cities. There is a lack of a single point of entry for homeless people.

"The overwhelming conclusion was that people wanted to keep talking," said Larry Geri, a member of United Way's board.

Toal said she hopes for an increase in volunteerism.

"We have to be able to offer our community real, tangible ways to help," she said.

Kilmoyer said her goal for 2009 is to ensure that faith communities find more ways for their congregations to help the homeless.

"We have got to get much more creative," she said.