RURAL HOMELESSNESS COUNTS

In order to properly measure a community's work toward ending homelessness, accurate information needs to be collected periodically. Determining the number and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness can serve a variety of purposes:

- improving homelessness and housing agency program planning;
- informing local, regional, state, and federal policy and planning decisions;
- establishing performance measurement standards;
- targeting interventions for particular subpopulations of people experiencing homelessness;
- drawing public attention to the issue of homelessness;
- reporting to the community and system of providers;
- securing funding, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Continuum of Care funding.

The HUD Continuum of Care funding process requires communities to conduct point-in-time counts at least every two years in order to collect information about homelessness. Many communities are taking advantage of this requirement to collect other information that will be useful in local and regional homelessness assistance efforts. (*Guidance for the biennial HUD point-in-time counts can be found in HUD's Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People, and the Guide to Counting Sheltered Homeless People.*)

Collecting information about the number, characteristics, and needs of homeless populations can be especially difficult for rural communities, as they have far fewer resources to commit to homelessness assistance and services. Rural communities in America are by no means alone in their struggle to plan, choose courses of action, and implement plans to end homelessness. But the needs of those they are helping, the community providers and systems they are working with, the obstacles they face, and the strategies they employ will often be quite different than in urban or suburban communities. This presents rural communities with valuable opportunities to explore the nature of the problem of homelessness as it is reflected in a rural environment, and then to educate the community at large – and potential funders – about the unique challenges they face in confronting the depth, dimensions, and nature of this problem.

The focus of this discussion is on the HUD point-in-time count as it relates to unsheltered counts in rural communities (in preparation for the next count, in January 2009). The discussion will outline the basics of point-in-time counts, count methodologies, challenges facing rural communities in conducting counts, and lessons learned in addressing these challenges (taking the discussion beyond the HUD minimum expectations).

POINT-IN-TIME COUNT BASICS

The point-in-time count of people experiencing homelessness is intended to represent a *one-night count*. This does not necessarily mean that all of the people counted are counted on that night or even within a 24-hour period; it means that, for those included in the count, it is determined in the days or weeks afterwards whether they were homeless on that *one night*, and where they were located. It is imperative that the whole community uses the same night to count to avoid double-counting those who might be in multiple places and also those who may be using shelters on and off.

An important and fundamental point of distinction: The HUD *Housing Inventory Chart*, which must be updated every year by Continuums of Care, includes permanent supportive housing, and is an *inventory of units and beds*. However, Continuums of Care are awarded points for conducting a point-in-time count at least every two years during the last ten calendar days of January – January 22 through 31 – and describing the count methodology, in the *Homeless Population and Subpopulations Data Sources and Methods Chart*, which is a *count of people experiencing homelessness* (and so does not include permanent supportive housing).

The McKinney-Vento Act's definition governs HUD's assistance programs, which target people living in shelters or in places not meant for human habitation, but not people in precarious housing situations. This does not mean that communities cannot collect other data (including information on doubled-up, precariously housed, imminent homelessness, substandard housing conditions) – in fact, many communities are collecting this information, and finding it very useful for planning, community education, and fundraising. However, communities must be able to separate these data from homelessness data reported to HUD. For the purpose of fulfilling the HUD requirements in completing a point-in-time count, communities should focus their attention on the quality of their methods and the accuracy of their data. Continuums are scored along these criteria, not based on the actual number of people counted.

POINT-IN-TIME COUNT METHODS

Point-in-time counts cover both homeless sheltered and unsheltered populations. For the sheltered portion, communities are encouraged to use homeless management information systems (HMIS) and provider or client surveys – or a combination of the two approaches; but, for the unsheltered portion of a point-in-time count, a number of different methods are available. The two primary approaches to completing unsheltered point-in-time counts are *public-places counts* (also known as *street counts*) and *service-based counts*.

Public-Places Counts

Public-places counts can either attempt to reach across an entire community (complete coverage), or instead focus on known locations (places where homeless people are known to be present). This method either relies on enumerator (i.e., the people doing the counting) judgment *or* an interview with screener questions to determine if people are in fact homeless, and, if so, to gather demographic information about them. Probability sampling and extrapolation is another methodological variation that is an option, and it is covered in the HUD Guide. This is a technique to estimate the total number of unsheltered people based on the number of unsheltered people who have been observed/counted/interviewed from a statistically reliable sample of count areas.

Service-Based Counts

Service-based counts take place at non-shelter services such as soup kitchens, food pantries, Health Care for the Homeless facilities, outreach programs, and mainstream social services agencies. For this approach, communities must use screener questions to determine who is homeless because other populations may also use these services. Generally speaking, rural communities have relied on combining a service-based count with a known-locations street count. For questions and general guidelines that help communities determine the best approaches to unsheltered point-in-time counts, see the *Appendix*, for a tool that was created by Abt Associates Inc.

RURAL CHALLENGES

Rural communities confront many challenges related to point-in-time counts. Some of these challenges are related to logistics in planning and executing the counts, some are related to methods, and some are related to resources. Of course, many of these challenges are interrelated and are associated with larger, complex systems issues. It must be said that these challenges may not be unique to rural communities; however, they may be exaggerated in rural regions, particularly those related to limited resources.

Logistics

Point-in-time counts require a level of buy-in to the cause of doing the job well, which in turn assumes a great deal of cooperation and communication across many different levels of a community. But rural communities must often confront difficult perceptions and attitudes about homelessness. Sometimes there is denial that homelessness exists at all, and sometimes there are misconceptions about its causes; frequently, it is seen as a "city problem." Because rural homelessness is often less visible, as compared with urban homelessness, these attitudes and perceptions are unfortunately reinforced.

Rural communities, generally speaking, have far fewer service providers than urban areas. With fewer service providers, the existing providers must shoulder more of the weight in planning and implementing a point-in-time count. Not exclusive to rural areas, but perhaps exaggerated by the geographical distances, there are often disconnects among providers, the faith community, schools, law enforcement, etc. – and this can make organizing counts very difficult.

Many communities throughout the country struggle with rugged terrain, and, of course, as transportation becomes difficult, this also becomes a resource issue—the costs of getting service providers and volunteer enumerators out to largely hidden areas can be prohibitive. Simply knowing where they are and finding remote areas where there might be homeless encampments can also be daunting. Service providers and volunteers must cover enormous geographical areas, which can set up great obstacles to achieving an accurate count – obstacles that are hard to overcome. Northern parts of the country experience inclement winter weather challenges, given the HUD point-in-time count timing of late-January. Extreme weather conditions can create impassable roads, which can completely thwart even the best plans.

Methods and Resources

Methodological challenges to point-in-time counts are often inextricably linked with resource challenges. Finding and counting people experiencing homelessness is a challenge for all communities. Many unsheltered homeless people do not want to be seen, let alone counted or interviewed; this is often reinforced by the lack of available services and assistance to be offered. In coordinating and executing the count, a community must be very careful in preventing duplication; and of course the more difficult it is to collect identifying information about people experiencing homelessness, the more challenging it is to prevent duplication.

All regions wrestle with methodological consistency across, and sometimes within, communities. With so many people participating in the planning and implementation, uniformity is critical to the process, developing the survey tool[s], execution, data collection, and evaluation. Rural areas struggle with consistency across these areas, largely due to geographic expanse. Communities only learn through experience the degree to which they can assume commitment from providers and other potential partners. Particularly in terms of being able to afford – or not – good, consistent training around the protocols, communities have difficulty with uniformity in process, and, directly related, in results.

Regardless of methodological approach, point-in-time counts are vulnerable to various biases. A one-night count, as opposed to a count that occurs over a longer period of time, raises questions of representativeness. It will provide a snapshot at a certain point in time but it raises questions about how accurately that snapshot reflects a community's true homelessness situation. But spreading the count out over several days raises other issues – the longer the data collection period, the more vulnerable the process is to double counting. Although service-based counts hold many promising benefits for rural communities, unless they are combined with a count of public places, they will likely miss unsheltered homeless people who do not use any services.

Rural communities – as much or more than other types of communities – struggle with consistent and expert data and statistical analyses. Many areas, particularly smaller communities, have little access to research departments of universities, and little access to local or state-level research expertise, in general.

All communities grapple with consistently implementing the HUD definition of homelessness (correctly distinguishing homelessness from those who are precariously housed and those living in substandard housing); depending on the level of training and experience among those carrying out the count, this can jeopardize the reliability of the collected data. And rural areas may be more likely to have trouble distinguishing between definitions related to places not meant for human habitation versus substandard housing.

Rural communities consistently report challenges in deciding what portion of their limited resources to devote to point-in-time counts. They do their planning with an eye toward the ultimate return on investment. Not unlike data collection and evaluation in general, communities must balance the need for good data with many other priorities, including quality housing and services.

LESSONS LEARNED

Depending on the size and characteristics of a given community, there are a variety of different factors that influence best approaches to point-in-time counts, as has been indicated. Generally speaking, the experience of communities throughout the country suggests that rural regions do well with service-based counts combined with a count of known locations. One promising variation on this approach is a sampling/extrapolation strategy by county (an approach used by Georgia in 2008, see: www.dca.state.ga.us/housing/specialneeds/programs/homeless_count.asp).

Uniformity: Tool and Protocol

Rural communities have reported progress in consistency and results to the degree that they can bring multiple counties and regions together to have the same process and survey. The importance of training cannot be overemphasized. Training appears to be the only way to ensure the consistency that is necessary to have a quality point-in-time count. If resources do not allow in-person training, then conference calls, web-based training, or other approaches might be possible.

It is imperative that all point-in-time count staff and volunteers understand and use consistent definitions of homelessness, precariously housed, and substandard housing conditions. If gathering data on substandard housing for local program planning, it was suggested that it is beneficial to use knowledgeable staff to identify people ahead of time who have no running water, heat, or kitchen utilities, and then use the same staff to go out and complete the interviews.

All communities need to make sure that they institute a quality-control procedure to review the data submitted. And they must have the expertise and tools necessary to de-duplicate. Communities benefit from centralizing their process as much as possible, but also making sure that they are "sharing the load." Appointing local coordinators is also recommended, while at the same time making sure to provide adequate support. Data entry is the important back-end part of the process, and there are pros and cons to centralizing or dispersing the data-entry burden. Centralized input may result in more consistent, higher quality data, while using an internet-based or other electronic reporting system will avoid an added data-entry process.

Learning From Experience

Point-in-time count processes must be evaluated and updated for each count. A coordinator or someone designated by the coordinator should make sure that a feedback log is kept immediately following the completion of a count, while the experience is still fresh. Communities must, in particular, pay attention to: (a) HUD NOFA updates, and (b) their own experience of what is working and what is not. It is important to solicit input from all local participants, which will also help with buy-in for future counts. Finally, communities must revisit the list of known locations prior to every count, as these can change dramatically in relatively short periods of time.

Publicity and Communication

Rural communities do well to publicize point-in-time counts, but every community must take its own approach and carefully consider how best to do this. Many communities are incorporating their point-in-time counts into their overall public relations approaches within their communities, with an emphasis on public reports and education. However, publicity is always a delicate matter, as people experiencing homelessness – who may be economically and otherwise vulnerable – should be considered first. In fact, in terms of planning, people experiencing homelessness and those who have previously experienced homelessness should be closely involved throughout.

Communities must decide how to best approach the informational content and packaging of the message to be taken from point-in-time counts. Again, this can be a delicate matter, and one which requires thoughtful consideration, deliberation, and consensus. Similar to Project Homeless Connect events, which are being implemented in many places throughout the country, point-in-time counts are potentially a starting point to engage a broader community in a discussion about homelessness. Communities should plan to draft a report about their point-in-time count, and some have incorporated data from the count into a larger discussion about homelessness challenges and solutions.

Point-in-time count information is valuable for a variety of reasons (summarized at the beginning of this paper), and these points should be useful to communities in their efforts to solicit funds for necessary resources. Some communities have had a good deal of luck soliciting funds from their state agencies – housing finance, human services, etc. – particularly when the potential value to those agencies is demonstrated. It is also important to establish and protect partnerships with mainstream services agencies where client overlap occurs, such as mental health, corrections, and primary health care organizations. Finally, as has been suggested earlier, whenever possible, it is important for communities to access technical and volunteer resources from colleges and universities.

A RURAL COMMUNITY CASE STUDY: SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina is a small rural state with four to five metro areas, and pockets of deep persistent poverty in its rural counties– some as high as 30%. For the 2007 point-in-time unsheltered count, 46 counties, broken up into five regional coalitions, or Continuums of Care voluntarily coordinated their efforts in order to provide the count with some degree of uniformity. A team of volunteers, representing the five regions, led the effort. In 2007, South Carolina obtained buy-in from a number of different relevant mainstream and state agencies, including social services, probation, and mental health. The count had a budget of approximately $40,000. South Carolina enjoyed the benefit of having the interest and participation of the state office on research, which handled the data entry and analysis for the count.

Strategic Approach

Statewide, South Carolina implemented a service-based unsheltered count, but they also allowed local Continuums with downtown areas to implement street counts. Four local communities carried out street counts. As a point of departure from the 2005 point-in-time count, South Carolina decided, in 2007, to count doubled-up people, as Continuums were interested in this information for planning purposes. (These data were kept separate from homelessness data for the purpose of reporting to HUD.) Finally, the team also hoped to collect quality data in enough of the rural counties to be able to experiment with extrapolation. Overall, there were not enough data collected in enough of the rural counties to be able to employ an extrapolation.

Three forms were used: Form A collected information on sheltered people from agencies not participating in HMIS. Form B collected information about the number of homeless people observed (used only by counties utilizing the observation methodology). Form C collected information from people seeking services or who were on the street and were experiencing housing difficulties in the two weeks after the point in time count day (used for the service-based counts). The timeframe for data collection was two weeks – people were asked, however, where they spent the night of January 25, the night designated for the point-in-time count.

Each of the five Continuums had a coordinator of the counts, each of the counties was encouraged to identify and county-level coordinator, and the coordinators were responsible for identifying services and shelters in their counties.

Two statewide trainings were conducted, focusing on count methodology and data collection instruments. The first training addressed: reviewing the methodology and forms with the local coordinators; sharing strategies and tips for recruiting volunteers; discussing best practices in finding people experiencing homelessness; and sharing timelines. The second training took a train-the-trainer format, and addressed helping the Continuums and the coordinators schedule local trainings for service providers and volunteers. In addition, training materials were provided for each of the county coordinators and were available on a website created for the event.

The service count forms (Form C) collected some identifying information for the purpose of de-duplication: the first letter of the first name, the second two letters of the last name, and the date of birth (so each person counted was given a unique identifier. The forms were designed to screen people for housing problems – to let them identify housing their housing situation form a variety of different options (later coded for homeless or not homeless).

Results

The 2007 South Carolina point-in-time count identified 6,759 individuals experiencing homelessness on January 25, 2007, using a broader definition than the HUD definition of homelessness. Of those, 5,594 were identified as meeting the HUD definition of homelessness. Various other demographic data were captured, meeting HUD requirements, and including additional demographic information. More information is available at: www.schomeless.org.

Obstacles

The biggest obstacle that South Carolina faced was the unevenness of efforts across the state. Despite much training and coordination, different communities had slightly different targets, some focusing on substandard housing, some using high numbers of probation staff. Lack of resources contributed to poor effort in some counties and there was a lack of consistency in implementing definitions. The doubled-up numbers were especially uneven.

Future Plans

For the 2009 point-in-time count, South Carolina plans to use a service-based count, uniformly across the state. They plan to use one form, collecting as much identifying information as possible (name, social security number, date of birth, gender). They will continue to collect information on other housing situations, including doubled-up status. Although, there are diminishing returns over the course of a two-week timeframe, South Carolina plans to continue this approach. Other goals include continuing to streamline and centralize the process, and they plan to carefully identify known locations in the community.