

King County Finds That Homeless Numbers Declined: Increased Services and Intervention Programs Are Making an Impact

Friday, January 28, 2011 – Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless (SKCCH) Director Alison Eisinger announced early this morning that the number of people counted outside in King County is down 11% compared to last year's count. Volunteer teams working through the night counted 2,442 people living on the streets of King County. The people were of every age, race and gender. Some were huddled in doorways, some sleeping in cars, camped in parking lots, or sheltered in makeshift campsites.

The One Night Count of People who are Homeless is conducted each January to produce a snapshot of the total number of unsheltered individuals on the streets of King County. Ms. Eisinger was joined at the announcement by Bill Block, the Director of the Committee to End Homeless, the regional coalition implementing the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness in King County.

Beginning at 2:00 am Friday morning, 886 volunteers in 137 teams counted the people sleeping outdoors in King County. The volunteers were organized through ten area headquarters. Counters returned to historical and new count areas in Bellevue, Redmond, Kirkland, Woodinville, Shoreline, Kenmore Bothell, Seattle, White Center, Federal Way, Kent, Renton and Auburn. The 2011 One Night Count also collected information from select hospitals about emergency room usage, and from Metro night owl buses operating throughout the county. The numbers released today are understood to represent the minimum number of unsheltered people on this single night.

Some factors that may have contributed to fewer people being counted this year include the fact that winter shelters were open in downtown Seattle and Redmond, filled with 149 people who would otherwise have been outside overnight. This year the 194 bus, a route long described as a "rolling shelter," was replaced by light rail service to SeaTac airport. And, in Auburn, Renton, and Kent, high water flooded out several areas that are usually counted.

The coordinated efforts under the Ten Year Plan to End Homeless to create permanent, supportive housing continue to show strong progress. Local investments in housing and services have resulted in 400 new apartments for homeless people opening in King County in just the last six months of 2010. Over 3,600 units have opened since the start of the plan five and a half years ago. Organizers also note that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) included substantial funding for local rental assistance programs, and other programs designed to help prevent homelessness.

While all of these programs can be credited for making strides in addressing the problem of homelessness, the expiration of ARRA investments at the federal level, and recently implemented cuts to Washington's safety net – with more expected —will likely put many more people at risk of homelessness and make it more difficult to help people leave homelessness in the coming years.

The number released this morning does not include the estimated 6,000 people staying in emergency shelter and transitional housing overnight. The coalition is also tracking the number of families turned away from shelters because they were full. The complete One Night Count tally will be released as soon as the other data are compiled.

At the announcement, Ms. Eisinger stated, “The unifying reason that volunteers from all walks of life show up to participate in the count is that we all sincerely hope that our efforts will result in more housing and less homelessness. While our state legislature is preparing to cut billions of dollars from vital services, I hope that people speak up to say that we must continue to create needed housing and jobs, and support our neighbors.”

Mr. Block added “As we do this annual count, we have to remember that homelessness as we saw it tonight is a very recent phenomenon. We did not used to have widespread homelessness and many nations around the globe provide the supports necessary to prevent it. The count reminds us that we can and we must end homelessness.”

SKCCH and other groups are urging volunteers and community members to demand that the State Legislature support the efforts that address the most urgent needs of our community residents, and particularly the people who are homeless in Washington.

Many volunteers who take part in the Count want to know what more they can do to make sure that our communities have enough housing and supportive services for people who are homeless. SKCCH invites the public to join its "Homelessness Advocacy 101: Beyond the One Night Count" workshops on Saturday, February 12th in Seattle and Renton. Free sign up is available at www.homelessinfo.org

Major funding for the One Night Count is provided by the King County Committee to End Homelessness, the coalition of government, business and non-profits responsible for implementing our community's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. The Count will help inform progress on the Plan, as well as provide insight into the dynamics of homelessness and inform strategies for solving it.

The Seattle King County Coalition on Homelessness (SKCCH), www.homelessinfo.org, works collaboratively to ensure the safety and survival of people who are homeless and to end the crisis of homelessness in our region For more information about the Count, please contact Alison Eisinger at 206.357.3148 or Alison@homelessinfo.org. For more information about the Ten Year Plan, please contact Bill Block at 206-263-9001 or bill.block@kingcounty.gov.