



Legislation Text

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To: Sonoma County Board of Commissioners

Department or Agency Name(s): Sonoma County Community Development Commission

Staff Name and Phone Number: Jenny Abramson, 565-7548

Vote Requirement: Informational Only

Supervisory District(s): All

Title:

2019 Homeless Count Presentation

Recommended Action:

Receive a report on the 2019 Sonoma County Homeless Point-in-Time Census and Survey, including a follow-up survey of unstably housed people throughout Sonoma County, and discussion of the ongoing impact of the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires on homelessness in Sonoma County. (Informational Only)

Executive Summary:

In 2018, just four months after the 2017 fire disaster, the Point-in-Time Homeless Count revealed a 6% increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County. In 2019, following the most thorough Count mobilization conducted yet, the results indicate some relief: the number of people experiencing homelessness on any given night has decreased 2%, to 2,951 people. There are several encouraging data points in the 2019 report, which suggest programs to assist fire victims and the transition to a "Housing First" system are yielding results. However the findings of the census and survey also suggest the full impact of the fires on homelessness has not yet arrived, and the loss of 3,300 residents reported by the American Community Survey may be one cause of the 2% decrease. The Board will receive a presentation on the 2019 Homeless Count and engage in a discussion of the ongoing impact of the 2017 fires on homelessness in Sonoma County.

Discussion:

The Community Development Commission conducts an annual point-in-time homeless census to track progress toward ending homelessness in Sonoma County. The Homeless Count is required for HOME Sonoma County, to enable participating agencies to access federal Continuum of Care funding-approximately \$3.7 million annually to address homelessness. In combination with the Homeless Information Management System's year-round data about people using homeless services, the Homeless Count informs the remaining housing needs.

In order to better assess housing needs following the fire disaster, in 2018 the Board authorized \$38,500 in County Reinvestment and Revitalization funds to fund the county's first survey of unstably housed residents, which was conducted simultaneously with the 2018 Homeless Count Survey. The results of that survey led to the conclusion that while the number of literally homeless people had increased by 161 persons (6%) immediately following the fires, the number of people living temporarily with others had doubled due to the fires. For the 2019 Homeless Count, \$38,964 was authorized to follow up on the 2018 telephone survey, to see what may have changed.

The 2019 "snapshot" of the number of homeless individuals identified in one night suggests that the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County has decreased slightly since the immediate aftermath of the fires, by approximately 2% or 45 persons, to 2,951 persons. This one-night count represents a reassuring return to the pattern of decreases since 2011, which was broken in the immediate aftermath of the fires. Thirty-four percent (34%) of the total, 994 people, were living in shelters or transitional housing for homeless persons, and 66%, or 1,957 people, were living in unsheltered locations. The number of sheltered people decreased by 73 (7%). The number of unsheltered people increased by 32 (2%). One marked change is that 29% of the population was counted in vehicles, an increase from 24% in 2018.

There are numerous possible causes of the small overall decrease. The availability of resources to assist fire victims may have lessened the immediate housing crisis and curtailed the flow of new people into homelessness; population loss may have lessened the pressure on the rental market, allowing people to exit homelessness.

Each year, following the census, a survey is conducted with homeless individuals and families, both sheltered and unsheltered, to gain some insight on their experiences and characteristics. In this year's survey, the percentage of respondents who were experiencing homelessness for the first time decreased from 2018, from 35% to 30%, which seems to suggest fewer people experiencing homelessness as a direct or indirect result of the fires. Another encouraging sign is the declining number of chronically homeless persons: this number dropped 10% from 747 to 675, suggesting that the implementation of a Coordinated Entry System that prioritizes resources for people who are most vulnerable is working. The number of homeless families with children has continued an eight-year downward trend, dropping 54% from 190 families in 2011 to 87

families in 2019. The number of homeless veterans has remained essentially the same as in 2018. However, a new and alarming sign echoes findings across California: the number of homeless youth counted in 2019 increased 29% in the past year, from 515 to 666. These data suggest that youth, who have no housing or credit history, are taking the brunt of the state-wide housing crisis.

The follow-up assessment of unstably housed populations through a telephone survey provides a better understanding of the ongoing effects of the 2017 fires on at-risk populations. Through 1,132 representative, telephone-based household surveys, our consultants at Applied Survey Research estimate that approximately 21,725 residents are doubled-up or “couch-surfing” in Sonoma County, an increase of 1% from 2018. In other words, one out of seven Sonoma County residents is living “doubled up”; this rate is about the same as in 2018, and slightly lower than the national average of one in eight.

One illuminating finding in the telephone survey is that the number of people who are unstably housed as a direct result of the 2017 fire disaster has dropped 32% (from 8,358 to 5,668), but the number who are unstably housed due to *indirectly* fire-related causes more than doubled, from 2,430 to 5,667. Indirect fire-related causes of unstable housing include persons who could no longer stay with family or friends after the fires; persons who could no longer afford their home or apartment after the fires; and persons who responded with an inability to find housing after the fires, the owner moving back in, rent increases, and post-fire price gouging. This shift suggests the impacts of the 2017 fire disaster on housing instability are not yet over. The full extent of the fire disaster’s effects on the precariously housed and homeless populations, as well as the long-term economic impacts of the fires, are not likely to be fully understood for several years.

Lastly, one of the most striking findings in the 2018 telephone survey was that the fires had immediately and disproportionately impacted older adults: in 2018, 43% of the respondents who were doubled up due to the fires were over the age of 55, compared to only 22% of those who were doubled up due to other causes. In 2019, the percentage of the respondents who were doubled up due directly or indirectly to the fires and over 55 had dropped to 32%. Instead, the impact of the intensified housing crisis following the fires is now visible in the transition-aged youth group (ages 18-24), 71% of whom were doubled up as a direct or indirect result of the fires (25% directly impacted and 46% indirectly impacted).

The combined results of the counts of both the literally homeless and unstably housed populations suggest that at the time the study was conducted-January-February 2019-the full

impact of the fires on homelessness in Sonoma County had still not been felt. Fortunately, a new wave of mass homelessness has been avoided so far. But caution is advised: thousands of people are living in quite precarious conditions, and it may be only a matter of time before they use up their remaining resources and lose their housing.

The comprehensive report (on file) is filled with information about the people who are living in a place not meant for human habitation or in a shelter for homeless persons in Sonoma County-as well as those who are unstably housed in Sonoma County. The report's 3-page Executive Summary is full of information in an easy-to-understand graphic form, and is attached to this item. The staff presentation will summarize the report's findings and give your Board the opportunity to ask questions about the state of homelessness in Sonoma County in 2019.

Prior Board Actions:

12/11/2018, Item 58 - Authorized professional services agreement with Applied Survey Research to conduct the 2019 Homeless Census and Survey.

7/10/2018, Item 47 - Accepted the 2018 Homeless Census and Survey Comprehensive Report.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 19-20 Adopted	FY20-21 Projected	FY 21-22 Projected
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures			
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources			

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

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Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

None

Attachments:

Attachment 1 - 2019 Homeless Count Executive Summary

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

2019 Homeless Census and Survey Comprehensive Report