Maine Voices: Annual one-night count helps shed light on homelessness in Maine

By Cullen Ryan Special to the Press Herald

Each year during the last 10 days of January, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development asks communities across the country to count the people who are homeless, inside shelters or outside in cars, campsites and other areas unfit for human habitation, on one single night.

This annual count provides data and information, but it should not be mistaken as a count of people who experience homelessness over the course of the year – that number is typically six times higher than the count on a single night.

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In terms of statistics, the most useful data to come from the point-in-time count is demographics. We find out age trends, where people are from and what issues they purport to have. However, even as an exercise in collecting demographics, almost all of the data points are based on self-disclosed information, which has historically proven to be less than accurate.

One example is chronic homelessness. According to the 2016 point-in-time count, conducted last Jan. 27, there were 199 people experiencing chronic homelessness in Maine on that night alone, up 3 percent from the year before.

However, we know through better data collection and reporting practices that the number of people who experienced chronic homelessness for all of 2016 was less than what was reported on that night, and it was down fairly significantly from the previous year. Through the Maine Homeless Management Information System, a database that collects information entered by emergency shelters and other homeless service providers throughout the state, we have access to data sets that more accurately reflect homelessness in Maine as well as progress made toward ending it.

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Although we know that one solitary night in the middle of the winter is not reflective of homelessness in Maine, HUD uses the data collected on the night of the point-in-time count in a variety of ways, one of which is to make funding decisions based on progress made toward ending homelessness. Asking self-report questions of people found to be homeless on one given night is not a sound scientific method of data collection and analysis, nor is it an effective method for gauging progress on ending homelessness in Maine.

We actually have a much better way – annual data, and ours is very good here in Maine.

About 98 percent of people who experience homelessness throughout this state show up in emergency shelters. Two percent or fewer stay outside or in places unfit for human habitation.

Both sets of data are collected in the Homeless Management Information System. Because of the software's sophistication, we are able to carefully screen data to ensure that people are not counted more than once, and then analyze the data looking back over the course of an entire year.

This is done every July and has proven to be effective, as we can gauge the state of homelessness in Maine, and what progress has been made on a year-to-year basis. We can see what programs and initiatives are working well, where additional resources are needed and discover emerging trends.

In 2016, those trends looked like this:

• That year, 7,020 people were homeless, compared to 7,679 people in 2015 – a 12 percent reduction.

• There was a 63 percent decrease in the average length of stay in homelessness in 2016 compared to 2015.

• There was a 54 percent decrease in veteran homelessness over two years: 201 people in 2016, compared to 438 in 2014.

• There was a 67 percent decrease in single adult long-term stayers over three years: 87 people in 2016, compared to 262 in 2013.

We are making progress in ending homelessness in Maine. Most promising is the reduction in the number of people who were chronically homeless and homeless veterans – we have housed the vast majority of them over the past three years, and we hope to finish that job in 2017. Whether we do or not will depend on us having the resources we need to do this.

In Maine, we know exactly what to do to end homelessness: We simply need resources for affordable housing, rental subsidies that level the playing field for people in poverty and services for adequate support so people will stay housed successfully in the community where they can thrive. The irony is that we spend more keeping people homeless than keeping them housed. Let's invest in ending homelessness.

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