

State Guidelines Point in Time and Housing Inventory Count of Homeless Persons

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Department of Commerce
Innovation is in our nature.

Contact Information

For more information concerning these Guidelines, and the Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act, please contact:

Department of Commerce
Community Services & Housing Division
PO Box 42525
Olympia, Washington 98504-2525

(360) 725-2976 ian.kinder-pyle@commerce.wa.gov

<http://www.commerce.wa.gov/PIT>

Introduction

The Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act requires an annual count of homeless persons in Washington State. The purpose of these guidelines is to define the common elements required of all local counts, to ensure that data is comparable between counties, and to ensure that confidentiality is protected.

Communities are encouraged to adapt this basic framework to the specific conditions and count infrastructure of their community.

The Act specifically states:

[RCW 43.185C.030](#)

The department shall annually conduct a Washington homeless census or count consistent with the requirements of [RCW 43.63A.655](#). The census shall make every effort to count all homeless individuals living outdoors, in shelters, and in transitional housing, coordinated, when reasonably feasible, with already existing homeless census projects including those funded in part by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the McKinney-Vento homeless assistance program. The department shall determine, in consultation with local governments, the data to be collected.

All personal information collected in the census is confidential, and the department and each local government shall take all necessary steps to protect the identity and confidentiality of each person counted.

The department and each local government are prohibited from disclosing any personally identifying information about any homeless individual when there is reason to believe or evidence indicating that the homeless individual is an adult or minor victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking or is the parent or guardian of a child victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking; or revealing other confidential information regarding HIV/AIDS status, as found in RCW 70.24.105. The department and each local government shall not ask any homeless housing provider to disclose personally identifying information about any homeless individuals when the providers implementing those programs have reason to believe or evidence indicating that those clients are adult or minor victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking or are the parents or guardians of child victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Summary data for the provider's facility or program may be substituted.

The Washington homeless census shall be conducted annually on a schedule created by the department. The department shall make summary data by county available to the public each year. This data, and its analysis, shall be included in the department's annual updated homeless housing program strategic plan.

Date of Count

Because the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) directs Continuums of Care to perform a point in time count (PIT) and housing inventory count (HIC) of homeless persons during the last ten days of January, to avoid duplication the state mandated count will be done on Thursday, January 26, 2017.

This date is unlikely to be ideal for every community. Communities are free to conduct additional counts on other dates.

Communities should strive to perform their counts on this date. However, if a particular facility/program that serves homeless persons is not able to collect data on that day, or counting on that day would significantly undercount unique individuals frequenting that location, the count for that specific facility can be done on any day during the last ten days of January, provided efforts are made to ensure that the count is unduplicated.

Example: a food bank that is not open on Thursdays could do a count on Saturday if they explicitly ask that the form only be filled-out once by respondents, and/or identifiers were collected that could be unduplicated during tabulation. Respondents should be asked to indicate where they slept on the night of the point in time count (Thursday night).

In special circumstances (such as very rural areas) the count can be performed over the course of several days at particular facilities, provided efforts are made to un-duplicate count data and refer to the night of the count.

Housing Inventory Count

HUD requires counties to collect information on the number of individuals in each homeless program included in the housing inventory chart. This includes all emergency shelter programs, homeless transitional housing programs, permanent supportive housing programs and rent assistance.

This information is collected during the same week as the point in time count. Counties will be responsible for providing accurate data on the number of individuals staying at each facility either using Commerce HMIS or their own approved methods.

Protecting Identities of Persons Counted

As per [43.185C.180](#), personally identifying information (such as names, birthdays, addresses, etc.) cannot be collected unless written consent is obtained from the persons providing the information.

... (2) Information about homeless individuals for the Washington homeless client management information system shall come from the Washington homeless census and from state agencies and community organizations providing services to homeless individuals and families. Personally identifying information about homeless individuals for the Washington homeless client management system may only be collected after having obtained informed, reasonably time limited written consent from the homeless

individual to whom the information relates. Data collection shall be done in a manner consistent with federally informed consent guidelines regarding human research which, at a minimum, require that individuals be informed about the expected duration of their participation, an explanation of whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the data collection and their rights regarding their personal identifying information, an explanation regarding whom to contact in the event of injury to the individual related to the homeless client survey, a description of any reasonably foreseeable risks to the homeless individual, and a statement describing the extent to which confidentiality of records identifying the individual will be maintained....

As per the [HEARTH ACT](#), the term ‘personally identifying information’ means individually identifying information for or about an individual, including information likely to disclose the location of a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, including: (A) a first and last name; (B) a home or other physical address; (C) contact information (including a postal, e-mail or Internet protocol address, or telephone or facsimile number); (D) a social security number; and (E) any other information, including date of birth, racial or ethnic background, or religious affiliation, that, in combination with any other non-personally identifying information, would serve to identify any individual.

Any personally identifying information collected by the count must be protected from release to persons not directly involved in the count process. Steps should be taken to ensure that only persons that must view personally identifying information as part of the counting process have access to that information. Persons collecting and handling personally identifying information must be explicitly instructed that the information must remain confidential, and steps must be taken to ensure that personally identifying information contained on paper forms and databases is secured from unauthorized access.

Written consent forms authorizing the collection of personally identifying information must explicitly state: how the information will be used, that persons being surveyed are under no obligation to provide personally identifying information, and the potential risks of providing information.

Important Note: No personally identifying information should be entered into HMIS as part of the count from persons who are 1) in a DV agency; 2) currently fleeing or in danger from a domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking situation or 3) has HIV/AIDS.

Information Collected in Count

Each community must be able to derive counts of each of the following data elements from their count. Communities are free to collect additional information. Specific required wording is provided for questions where subtle differences in how the question is asked and/or defined could lead to results that are not comparable between communities.

It is understood and expected that specific details about some unsheltered persons will be difficult or impossible to collect (i.e., substance use problems, disabilities). The most important information regarding unsheltered persons is the total count. The importance of accurate information collection descends by the order listed below.

	<i>Information</i>	<i>Notes</i>
1	Persons (all household types)	
2	Persons by gender	
3	Single persons	
4	Households (all household types)	
5	Households with minor children accompanied by an adult(s)	
6	Minor children in households, accompanied by an adult(s)	
7	Persons under age 18 unaccompanied by an adult	
8	Households with no minor children	
9	Senior citizens (aged 65 or older)	
10	1-9 above Unsheltered. (In places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, on the street)	
11	1-9 above in Emergency Shelter (1-90 day time limits)	
12	1-9 above in Transitional Housing (91 days to 2 years time limit)	

13	Chronically homeless individuals (Homeless more than one year OR more than three times in last three years with the combined length of homelessness being one year or more; with disability)	
14	Chronically homeless families	Families with at least one chronically homeless individual
15	Race	White, Black or African-American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
16	Ethnicity	Hispanic or Non-Hispanic
17	Veterans	A veteran is someone who has served on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States. This does not include inactive military reserves or the National Guard unless the person was called up to active duty.
18	Mentally disabled	Includes persons with self-reported mental health problems
19	Persons with alcohol and/or other drug problems	Includes persons with formally diagnosed alcohol or other drug abuse problems, and persons who self identify a substance use problem.
20	Physically disabled	Should only include persons with chronic physical problems, as opposed to time-limited physical injuries.
21	Persons with both substance use and mental health problems (formally diagnosed or self identified)	Can be derived via substance use and mental health questions (13 and 14 above)
22	Domestic violence victims	Asked prior to any collection of personal identifiers. If answer is “yes” personally identifying information may not be collected. Only includes individuals and family members of individuals who are in DV shelter or are <u>currently fleeing or in danger</u> from a domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking situation.
23	Persons with HIV/AIDS	If answer is “yes” personally identifying information may not be collected.
24	Seasonal agricultural workers	Includes both traditional “farm workers,” and others who seasonally derive income from agricultural activities such as collecting decorative forest products.

Who is counted in the annual homeless count?

For the point in time count, persons living in emergency shelters (including motel/hotel vouchers), transitional housing, or unsheltered (in places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, on the street) should be counted. Persons living in a dwelling lacking any of the following should be considered homeless: drinking water, restroom, heat, ability to cook hot food, or ability to bathe.

Persons living temporarily with family or friends due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (often referred to as “*doubled-up*” or “*couch surfing*”) do not meet the HUD definition of homeless. There is no requirement to count these individuals; however this data is useful in identifying the need for housing and services.

For the purposes of this count, transitional housing refers to housing where all program participants have signed a lease or occupancy agreement, the purpose of which is to facilitate the movement of homeless individuals and families into permanent housing within 24 months or such longer period as HUD determines necessary. The program participant must have a lease or occupancy agreement for a term of at least 1 month that ends in 24 months and cannot be extended.

Counts do not need to conduct rigorous screening of persons to determine whether they are homeless. Generally persons who self identify as homeless should be counted, unless they obviously do not fit the criteria. Instructions to surveyors and survey forms should include the definition of who is considered homeless, as appropriate.

Requirements to Minimize Count Duplication

Counts must strive to limit double-counting persons by employing the following strategies:

- Conduct the count during one day (minor exceptions allowed as described previously).
- Obtain written consent to collect personal identifiers that allow un-duplication during count tally.
- Explicitly ask person being surveyed whether they have been counted previously.

Locations of Persons Counted

- All homeless persons in emergency or transitional housing must be counted.
- Persons living outside, in cars, in tents, encampments and other “unsheltered” places should also be counted.

Under no circumstances should count surveyors risk collecting count information in ways that pose a significant safety risk. Persons such as experienced outreach workers and currently/formally homeless persons with relationships with existing homeless persons may be able to safely enter isolated homeless encampments to collect count information.

Count activities can be funded by revenue collected as part of the Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act. Local governments must spend enough Act funds to count people throughout the county.