

County of Santa Clara

Office of Supportive Housing

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February 22, 2021

TO: Honorable Members of the Board of Supervisors
Jeffrey V. Smith, County Executive

FROM: Consuelo Hernandez, Director, Office of Supportive Housing

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C.H.

SUBJECT: Update on the 2021 Homeless Census and Survey

Every two years, during the last ten days of January, communities across the United States conduct comprehensive biennial Point-in-Time (PIT) Counts of the local population experiencing homelessness. The biennial PIT Count consists of a count of unsheltered persons, a count of sheltered persons, and a survey of homeless persons to gather demographic data and assess needs. Together, the data are presented as a “Homeless Census and Survey” and are required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) of all Continuums of Care (CoC) receiving federal funding to provide homeless services. The Santa Clara County CoC last conducted a biennial PIT Count in January 2019.

Due to the current health crisis, HUD offered CoCs the option to utilize a waiver, removing the requirement for the CoC to conduct a count of unsheltered homeless individuals in 2021. As the Collaborative Applicant for the Santa Clara County CoC, the County’s Office of Supportive Housing (OSH) is responsible for conducting the PIT Count and ensuring compliance with federal requirements. To focus resources on assisting homeless persons during the pandemic and to reduce risks to staff and volunteers, OSH submitted a notification to HUD to utilize the waiver for the unsheltered count and the survey portions of the PIT Count in 2021. The decision to utilize the waiver will not impact current or future HUD funding opportunities. Many CoCs across the country, including San Francisco City/County, Alameda County, San Diego County, Los Angeles City/County, and Seattle/King County have also chosen to utilize the waiver for the unsheltered PIT Count this year.

OSH convened a PIT Count planning committee comprised of stakeholders including service providers, local jurisdictions, and individuals with lived experience. The planning committee met throughout the fall and early winter to develop and recommend modifications to the PIT Count methodology to ensure it could be done safely during the pandemic. As the COVID-19 cases surged in the community in December 2020 and January 2021, the committee determined that the personnel and resources required to conduct the PIT Count would be better spent on efforts to assist and protect homeless individuals during the pandemic. Committee members believed it was too risky and ineffective to conduct a PIT Count during the pandemic. For example, volunteers are usually paired with homeless persons who then drive through sections of the county or walk along creeks to enumerate homeless persons in encampments. This method has been very effective because individuals with lived

experience of homelessness are the PIT Count guides and are critical to ensuring an accurate count. Under public health guidelines, homeless guides could not be paired with volunteers. The CoC Board approved the committee's recommendation to postpone the 2021 PIT Count.

Understanding the number and experiences of people living in tents, vehicles, and on the street continues to be a top priority. The 2020 Community Plan to End Homelessness includes multiple strategies to improve the quality of life for unsheltered individuals and create healthy neighborhoods for all. Over the past year, despite the challenges of the pandemic, the County and partners expanded shelter, outreach, hygiene, and other services for unsheltered individuals. For example, after emergency shelter capacity was reduced in the spring of 2020 to allow for social distancing among shelter residents, the County worked with the City of San José and other partners to open new shelters at the Fairgrounds and the San Jose Convention Center, lease and operate hotels for non-congregate shelters, and operate all shelters 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

The decision to utilize the waiver for the unsheltered PIT Count does not indicate a diminished focus on expanding services to people living outside and the OSH will continue to work with CoC partners to expand and enhance services across the supportive housing system. While doing so, the OSH will utilize other data sources, such as the Homeless Management Information System, the community-wide homeless database, to understand trends related to the needs of this vulnerable population, in lieu of the 2021 PIT Count. Please contact Kathryn Kaminski, OSH Deputy Director, at kathryn.kaminski@hhs.sccgov.org with questions.

Cc: Chief Board Aides
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