



## Census finds ‘tragic’ rise in residents without shelter

June 5, 2024 – The number of people living on Central Florida’s streets, in their cars and in the woods has more than doubled over the past year, the Homeless Services Network reported Wednesday – the result of years of rising rents, stagnant incomes, an ongoing shortage of both affordable housing and emergency shelter beds, and continued growth of the region’s overall population.

“This January, we found that the number of people experiencing homelessness across Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties increased by 28%. More concerning, though, is that the number of people experiencing *unsheltered* homelessness – those for whom there is no space in our emergency shelters – increased 105%,” said Martha Are, CEO of the nonprofit Homeless Services Network.

“It is a tragedy for this community, it is a tragedy for everyone forced to survive without housing, and it especially a tragedy, for instance, for the growing numbers of elderly women who are becoming homeless for the first time in their lives. For these seniors, especially, the experience of homelessness is absolutely terrifying.”

The newest figures come from the region’s Point-In-Time Count, a federally mandated census of people who are homeless that took place in late January. The data is de-duplicated to ensure people aren’t counted twice and then submitted to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD officials must approve each region’s methodology and results before the numbers are publicly released.

While the PIT Count is widely acknowledged as imperfect – results rely on the number of volunteers, the weather, and the ability to find and survey people experiencing homelessness – Are said the findings mirror what the network of nonprofit homeless providers have witnessed in the community. She added, though, that the 2024 count drew four times the number of volunteers as the 2023 census, leading to what is likely a more accurate count than those during which volunteer participation was limited by COVID-19.

Overall, 2,883 people across the three counties were found to be homeless on the night of Jan. 22 of this year, including 1,682 people staying in shelters and 1,201 people who were unsheltered.

Though there was no count of unsheltered homelessness in 2021 due to the pandemic, the numbers have been rising since then: from 426 in 2022 to 587 one year later, and now 1,201.

Most troubling, for the first time, just over half of homeless individuals age 65 and over are living without shelter.

“For many people who live on Social Security or pensions, the cost of housing, food and medical care is simply outpacing their modest cost-of-living increases,” Are said. “Every month, our network sees about 1,000 individuals and families who are homeless for the first time.”

(cont.)

Because of the continued influx, people are also waiting longer even when they qualify for housing assistance. Chronic homelessness – defined as lasting longer than a year for a person with a documented disability – climbed 63% over the past year.

Meanwhile, the number of shelter beds in the region has actually dropped in recent years. In 2023, for instance, the Salvation Army had to rely in part on hotel vouchers as its facility underwent renovations, and Covenant House closed its emergency shelter for youth.

And funding for permanent supportive housing – the type needed for people with disabilities – now covers about 200 fewer beds than it did a year ago.

In addition, rent remains near an all-time high in Central Florida. According to Rentdata.org, in 2019 the fair market cost of a two-bedroom apartment here was \$1,190. In 2024, it is \$1,857 – a \$667 increase each month. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford metro has one of the nation’s worst shortages of affordable housing for people living below the federal poverty limit.

The region’s deficit is nearly 57,000 units for extremely low-income households (30% of area median income) and nearly 95,000 units for households at half the area median income.

“Despite these overwhelming challenges, in the past year we’ve helped over 6,900 people move into long-term, stable housing,” Are said. “But when you have nearly twice that number *becoming* homeless, you can see what the problem is. We must somehow stem the tide.”

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