

Ranks of homeless grow in Fort Collins



Jason Pohl, The Coloradoan

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(Photo: Coloradoan library)

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With homeless issues at a crossroads in Fort Collins, newly released data indicate the number of people living on the streets or in shelters — particularly veterans — has climbed once again during a Northern Colorado winter.

A total of 301 people — 60 percent of them men — were staying outside, in emergency shelters or in transitional housing during the January Point-in-Time survey, Homeward 2020 reported. During a January night in 2014, 289 homeless people were counted, up from 250 in 2013.

Included in the 4 percent uptick from last year was a doubling in the number of veterans, up from 15 in 2014 to 32 this year. There was also a leap in the number of people identified as chronically homeless, including 68 individuals and three families.

By way of comparison, 47 people were listed as chronically homeless in each of the past two years, defined as being homeless for at least a year or at least four times during the past three years.



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Survey glimpses faces of Fort Collins' homeless population

Now armed with three years of data on homelessness, Homeward 2020 Director Vanessa Fenley said service providers, policy makers and the city can begin targeting where the change is needed — something called for in Fort Collins where [homeless issues last year reached an apparent boiling point](#).

"That is not an unmanageable number," Fenley said of the 301 people surveyed this year. The biggest hurdles stems from a lack of affordable housing options in a market that continues to push low-income people to its fringes. "I think sometimes homelessness feels like a huge issue."

Larger transitional and affordable [housing projects including Redtail Ponds](#) have been heralded as a starting place in pursuit of a solution. The 51,000-square-foot, four-story complex, located on Fossil Boulevard just off College Avenue in south Fort Collins, will provide 60 units, including 40 permanent supportive housing apartments for formerly homeless individuals with a disability. Up to 15 units will be for formerly homeless and disabled veterans, referred by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.



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Homeless center director to manage Redtail Ponds

The remaining 20 affordable housing units will be for individuals earning about 40

percent to 50 percent of the area's median income. The project is slated to open this spring.

Point-in-Time surveys are conducted annually in January, with results reported to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Data are then compiled into an annual snapshot of homelessness across the country, offering service providers insight into the changing face of episodic and chronic homelessness, shelter use and homeless demographics.

Last year's figures estimated more than 578,000 people across the United States were experiencing homelessness on a single night. That number is down about 10 percent from 2010, and the number of non-sheltered homeless individuals dipped about 25 percent. A 33 percent drop in homeless veterans has also been noted nationally, and providers don't yet have clear answers as to why there was an uptick this year in Fort Collins.

National results from January's survey won't be available for several months.

"I think if anything, we're probably not as different when it comes to homeless as we sometimes feel we are," Fenley said, adding that planners are still learning what's working and what's not in other cities.

Fort Collins continues to square off with an identity crisis as it grapples with how to manage sometimes opposing worlds of pro-service and pro-business interests, particularly in and around Old Town. This week's survey data release underscores that.

Police last summer came under fire for enforcement efforts that took aim at illegal camping along the Poudre River corridor. Last summer also saw a spike in the number of homeless and — more commonly — transient complaints in Old Town. Frustrated business owners up and down Linden Street reported behaviors at Jefferson Park were among the worst ever.

But homeless advocates lashed back when [details emerged of a proposal to pave the trampled park](#) to make way for a private parking lot to serve a booming section of town. It's a topic that routinely surfaces at public meetings that discuss the future of homelessness in the Choice City. The proposal continues to make its way through the city's review process.



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With recent sweep, homeless issues reach boiling point



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Homeless concerns voiced at Jefferson Park meeting

Adding to area homeless issues, the Colorado branch of the American Civil Liberties Union in February filed a class-action lawsuit against the city, claiming the [free speech rights of homeless individuals were being infringed upon by Fort Collins police enforcement of a panhandling ordinance](#). City council last week repealed some aspects of the ordinance, still the potential outcome of the lawsuit remains uncertain.

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ACLU panhandling suit vs. Fort Collins hangs in limbo



"We certainly don't see ourselves as the ones who can fix everything, but we certainly see ourselves as part of it," said Beth Sowder, interim director of the city's social sustainability department. Project like Redtail Ponds are good for addressing chunks of the challenge but, "we still need more for sure."

When it comes to the different faces of homelessness — including springtime and summer complaints about transients — Sowder said the city is nearing the end of planning for an expanded outreach effort targeting newcomers to town, though details of the plan have not yet been finalized. Police and business owners alike last summer reported transients as more confrontational.

Talks have included insight from Fort Collins police, downtown businesses, city officials and a slew of service providers. And while it has at times appeared the group has been spinning its wheels in meetings, Homeless Gear Executive Director David Rout said that things were finally beginning to march forward, albeit slowly.

"I think we are moving in that direction," he said, adding that the survey data only stand to bolster how to best wrestle with homeless issues. "I am confident we'll have some more concrete protocols."

Reporter Jason Pohl covers breaking news and homeless issues for the Coloradoan. Follow him on Twitter: @pohl_jason.

2015 Point-in-Time Survey by the numbers

301: individuals without shelter or in emergency or transitional housing (up from 289 last year)

74: non-sheltered contacts

227: sheltered contacts

166: individuals older than 18

190: men

125: contacts who reported having a disabling condition

32: veterans

71: chronically homeless

Data courtesy Homeward 2020 January 2015 Point-in-Time survey

