



2023 Orange County Unsheltered Homeless Survey



Office of
CARE COORDINATION
County Executive Office



Commission to
END HOMELESSNESS
Office of Care Coordination



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INTRODUCTION

Based on the 2022 Orange County Point in Time (PIT) Count, a total of 5,718 individuals were found to be experiencing homelessness on the night of Monday, February 21, 2022. Of those people, 3,057 (53.5%) were experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Although this represented a 22.8% decrease of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness from the 2019 PIT Count, the County of Orange's Commission to End Homelessness remains dedicated to exploring and supporting effective responses that address the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

In the Fall of 2022, the Commission to End Homelessness (Commission) directed the County of Orange's (County) Office of Care Coordination to undertake a comprehensive survey of individuals currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness. This local effort was a distinct, but complementary project to the PIT as it focused on asking questions that provided insight into efforts to address homelessness that are working or not working, gaps and barriers in services and the accessibility of available resources. To facilitate this initiative, an Ad Hoc Committee comprised of several commissioners and senior staff from various commissioners' offices was formed. The Ad Hoc Committee's primary objective was to lead a focused approach by defining the survey's goals and direction. Two key areas emerged as the primary objectives of the survey:

- 1. Understanding individual's past experiences and current preferences regarding engagement with Orange County's homeless service system, and**
- 2. Gaining insights into the diverse connections individuals experiencing homelessness have to Orange County and the cities within the county.**

Since 2017, the County has worked collaboratively with cities and the nonprofit provider community to develop a robust homeless service system. Significant investments have been made by the County and cities to develop permanent and emergency housing projects, and to support robust countywide services and programs. Providers have partnered with local law enforcement and cities to increase outreach efforts to better connect with and comprehend the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Coordinated delivery of supportive services, including mental health, substance use and primary healthcare services, has been a key focus, alongside ensuring access to mainstream benefits. Despite these concerted efforts, the 2022 PIT Count, while indicating a reduction in unsheltered homelessness, also revealed an increase in the percentage of individuals who reported experiencing chronic homelessness, substance use and mental health issues, physical and developmental disabilities and domestic violence.

Recognizing the infusion of housing and support services into the homeless service system, the Commission is focused on discerning the most effective means of connecting individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness with these vital resources. Additionally, the Commission aims to unravel the multifaceted connections individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness have to the community. This survey serves as a valuable opportunity to understand their community connections, educational backgrounds, employment history and the areas where they have predominantly experienced homelessness. This understanding enables the Commission to help create and recommend policies that increase access and reduce barriers to housing and services to overcome homelessness and achieve long-term housing stability.

A survey of this scale represents an unprecedented collection of data and insights gathered from people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Orange County. The Commission, in partnership with the County's Office of Care Coordination, believes that the findings resulting from this data, which echo the voices of people on the streets, will play a pivotal role in shaping the homeless service system.

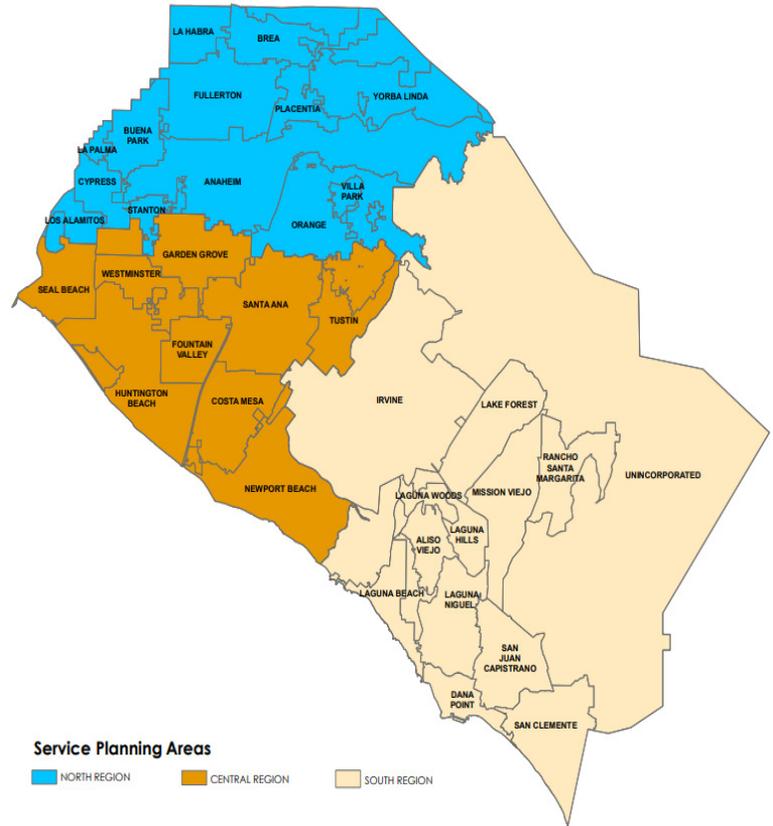


METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the 2023 Orange County Homeless Survey (2023 Homeless Survey) was meticulously developed through collaboration between the County's Office of Care Coordination, City Net, the Institute for Urban Initiatives and the Commission.

City Net has extensive experience counting and surveying unsheltered homeless populations in Orange County and throughout Southern California. In addition to their work on the Flood Control Channel Engagement Initiative and the Santa Ana Civic Center, City Net has conducted over 40 total homeless counts in Southern California, including 18 in Orange County cities. City Net also conducted the North Orange County census which covered 13 cities in the North Service Planning Area, served as the PIT Count Project Lead in 2019 and 2022 and implemented the 2024 PIT Count.

The Institute for Urban Initiatives (Urban Initiatives) is a non-profit organization that responds to the economic, housing and social needs of cities, and counties from local community, regional, national and international perspectives. It consists of several community development, economic development and social justice initiatives that promote research, direct resources and shape policy. A primary focus for Urban Initiatives is homelessness in the United States and especially California, which has the largest homeless population in the country. Urban Initiatives works with many counties and Continuums of Care (CoCs) in California to ensure that resources are maximized to help prevent and end homelessness, and facilitate the sharing of information and resources between counties, CoCs, and the state and federal government agencies that oversee the response to homelessness and homeless services. Through this work, Urban Initiatives assists counties and CoCs to complete federal, state and local grant applications, design and implement surveys and counts of people experiencing homelessness and providing strategic research, technical assistance and planning support related to the issue of homelessness.



The 2023 Homeless Survey was conducted in May 2023 and canvassed the entire geographic area of Orange County by Service Planning Areas in a 30-day timeframe. The target population for the 2023 Homeless Survey was unsheltered individuals as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), meaning someone with a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport or camping ground. The 2023 Homeless Survey was implemented by City Net utilizing a stratified sample of at least 20 percent of the number of unsheltered persons counted during the 2022 PIT homeless count, which is approximately 608 individuals. This included a focus on ensuring geographic equity and was relevant to achieving statistical significance.



METHODOLOGY

City Net engaged both early morning and late evening survey activities with the expectation that multiple days and times provided an opportunity to include anyone who might be away from their normal spot during the time of either survey event. City Net also coordinated and deployed with additional personnel (as able or as needed for safety, access, etc.) including, but not limited to, County staff and/or law enforcement. To implement the 2023 Homeless Survey, City Net reviewed and updated the 2022 PIT survey maps with known hotspot locations through the input of key stakeholders, including the County, cities, local law enforcement and local outreach teams. This mapping identified well-known hotspots where people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are known to congregate and facilitated the identification of the best places to survey the target population.

In conjunction with City Net and the Commission's Ad Hoc Committee, the Office of Care Coordination crafted a comprehensive 76-question survey and incorporated conditional logic to ensure only applicable questions were answered by the respondent. The survey was structured into seven main sections that obtained information on demographics, current living situation, conditions related to being at risk of homelessness, shelter and outreach experience and preferences, community ties, subpopulations and closing questions for subsequent follow up. Although the survey's target population was people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, it included two sections designed to capture essential insights from individuals who were at risk of homelessness or experiencing sheltered homelessness, determined by the information provided in the current living situation section. The survey questions, including the phrasing, order and answer choices, underwent a thorough review and approval process. On April 19, 2023, the Commission unanimously approved the 2023 Homeless Survey questionnaire and requested to include additional answer options related to healthcare services and domestic violence assistance.

City Net coded the 2023 Homeless Survey into ARC GIS's Survey123 application to input surveys electronically. The collected data was housed securely in an online database. Additionally, City Net employed data security practices consistent with the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), as the 2023 Homeless Survey included questions to gather participant consent to share name and contact information with the County so the County could follow up with services.

The combined efforts of these organizations and the strategic methodology employed ensured a comprehensive and statistically significant survey which yields valuable insights into the experiences, preferences and needs of Orange County's unsheltered homeless population, ultimately contributing to more effective strategies to address homelessness in the region.



Geographic Equity in the County

The 2023 Homeless Survey sought to maintain geographic equity by ensuring the number of surveys collected in each region was appropriately proportionate to the 2022 PIT count numbers from the same area. The chart below highlights that effort and how the targeted number of surveys was exceeded.



Service Planning Area (SPA)	Cities Visited	Surveys Completed Per City (2023 Homeless Survey)	Surveys Needed Per City (2022 PIT Count)
North SPA	Anaheim	110	95
	Brea	5	5
	Buena Park	18	17
	Cypress	5	5
	Fullerton	46	40
	La Habra	11	9
	La Palma	3	2
	Los Alamitos	1	1
	Orange	28	26
	Placentia	6	6
	Stanton	16	12
	Villa Park	0	0
	Yorba Linda	1	1
	Unincorporated North	0	0
	Central SPA	Costa Mesa	30
Fountain Valley		7	7
Garden Grove		54	55
Huntington Beach		42	37
Newport Beach		19	19
Santa Ana		99	100
Seal Beach		3	2
Tustin		17	17
Westminster		34	31
Unincorporated Central		2	2
South SPA	Aliso Viejo	3	3
	Dana Point	5	5
	Irvine	13	12
	Laguna Beach	5	5
	Laguna Hills	2	2
	Laguna Niguel	6	6
	Laguna Woods	1	1
	Lake Forest	12	13
	Mission Viejo	5	5
	Rancho Santa Margarita	1	1
	San Clemente	18	16
	San Juan Capistrano	14	13
	Unincorporated South	0	0
Total		642	600



SURVEY PARTICIPATION



In May of 2023, City Net encountered 836 individuals. Of those individuals, 77% agreed to participate in the 2023 Homeless Survey.

836 Individuals Encountered

642 Agreed to Participate

586 Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness



DEMOGRAPHICS

As depicted in the following graphs and charts, the survey respondents closely mirror the demographic characteristics reported in the 2022 PIT count across several key demographic areas including age, race, ethnicity and gender. This alignment reinforces the credibility of the survey results in providing a fair representation of the overall larger population of persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Orange County.

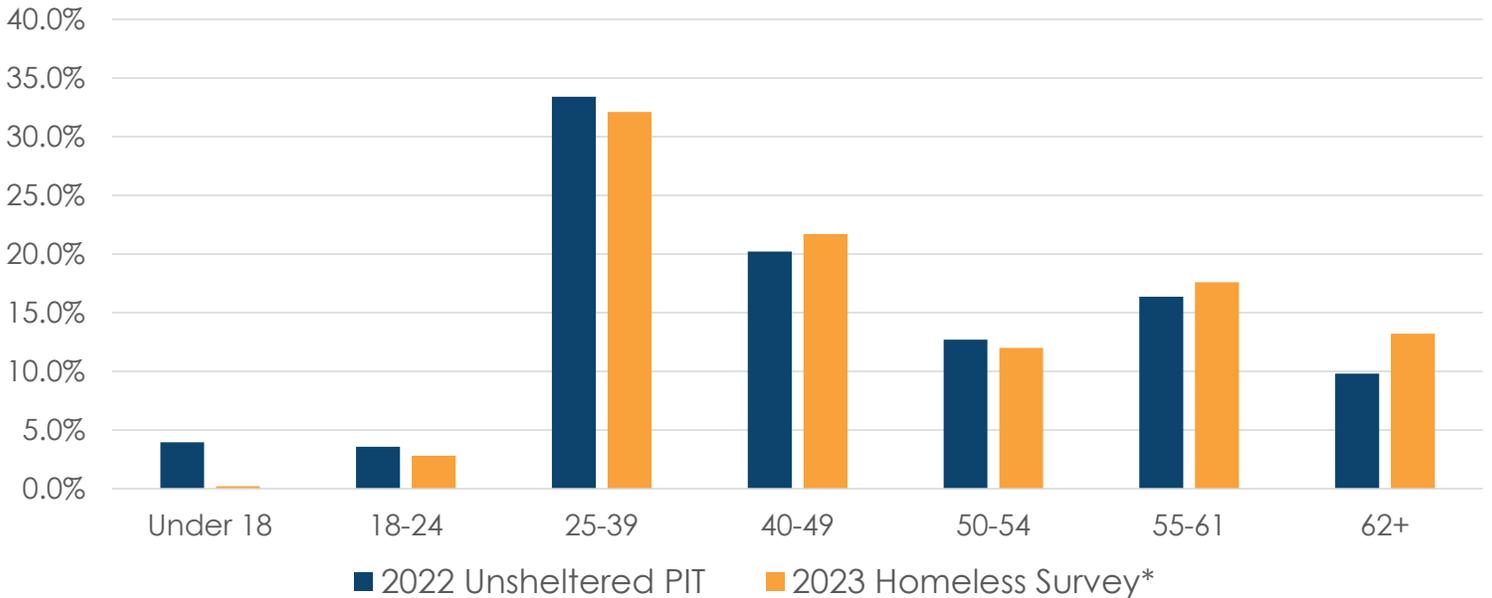
Age

When comparing the age-related data to the 2022 PIT count, both datasets show strikingly similar percentages of people within the age group 25-49, with both reporting at 53.6%. However, a subtle distinction arises in the Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) category which is comprised of individuals aged 18 to 24 years old. The 2022 PIT Count registered 3.6% of TAY experiencing unsheltered homelessness, while the 2023 Homeless survey had only 2.8%.

Furthermore, the 2023 Homeless Survey provides additional data to support the growing concern regarding the aging of the unsheltered homeless population. As shown in the chart, 13.4% of the survey respondents reported being seniors (at least 62 years old), with another 17.6% of respondents between the ages of 55 and 61 years old. In comparison, the 2022 PIT count reported 9.8% of the unsheltered homeless population as seniors, with an additional 16.7% between the ages of 55 and 61 years old.

These findings underscore the consistent trend of an aging unsheltered population, with a notable percentage comprised of seniors. The homeless service system, including street outreach, shelter and permanent housing components, must consider how to best make services available and target the engagement of older adults experiencing homelessness in Orange County.

Age Breakdown



Note: 0.5% of the respondents declined to answer

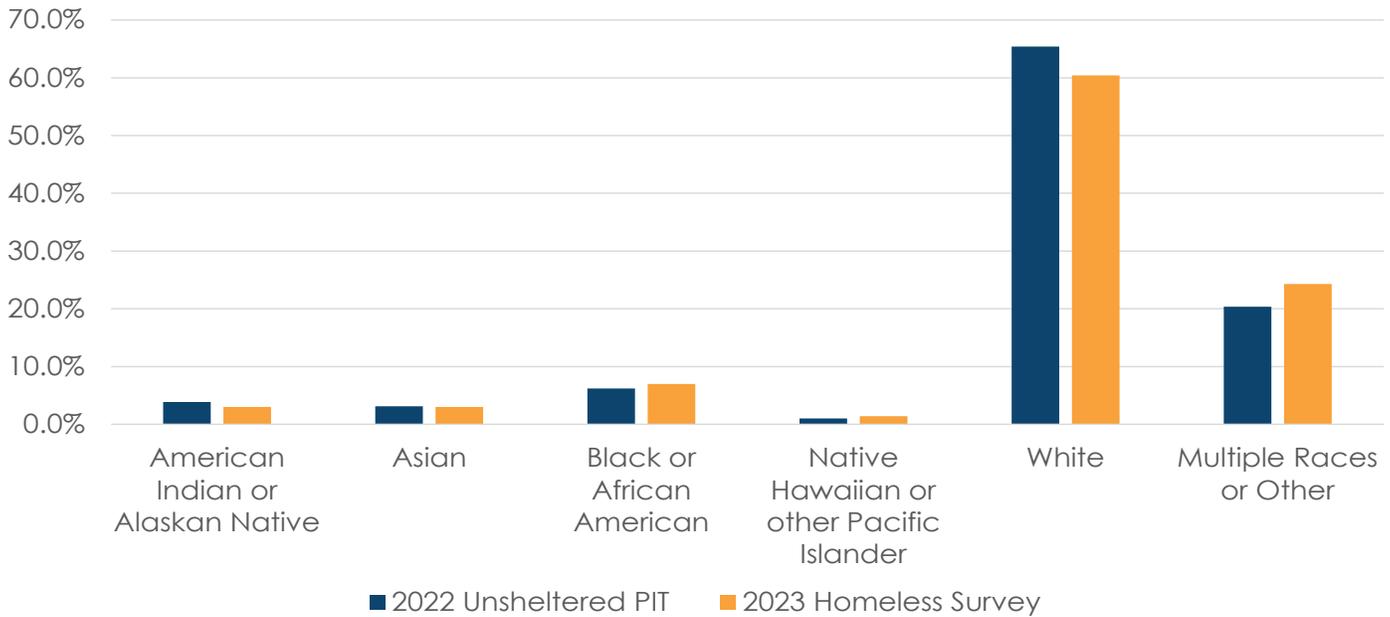


Race and Ethnicity

Nearly 38% of people surveyed identified as Hispanic or Latin(a)(o)(x), which closely aligns with the 2022 PIT count (34.2%). Moreover, the 2023 Homeless Survey findings consistently mirrored the demographics reported in the 2022 PIT count in several categories. The 2022 PIT count reported 65.4% of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness identified as White, while 60.4% of the 2023 Homeless Survey respondents identified as White.

These results highlight the remarkable consistency in the racial and ethnic composition of Orange County's unsheltered homeless population between the 2022 PIT count and the 2023 Homeless Survey, reinforcing the reliability and representativeness of the survey's findings. It emphasizes the importance of addressing homelessness with a nuanced approach that respects the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of those affected.

Race Breakdown



Veterans

According to the 2022 PIT count, 4.7% of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness identified as veterans having served in the U.S. armed forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps or Coast Guard). In contrast, 8.1% of survey respondents identified as veterans in the 2023 Homeless Survey.

Household Composition

In the 2023 Homeless Survey, a significant majority (76.8%) of respondents reported being a household or family-set of one. Another 17.4% indicated a household of two people, while 5.6% reported a household of three or more people. When respondents were asked about having a minor child (17 years old or younger) in their current household, only 3.9% answered affirmatively. Among those respondents with minor children, 80.0% reported having only one minor child currently in their household. Similarly, the 2022 PIT count reports 4.3% of adults experiencing unsheltered homelessness have at least one minor who is also experiencing unsheltered homelessness in their household as well.

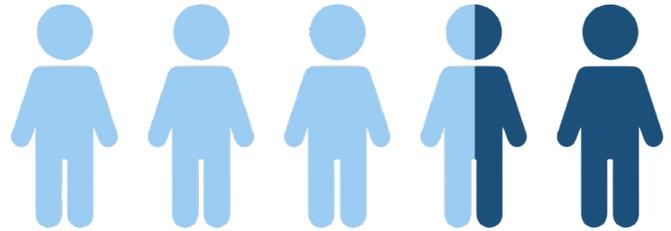


Gender

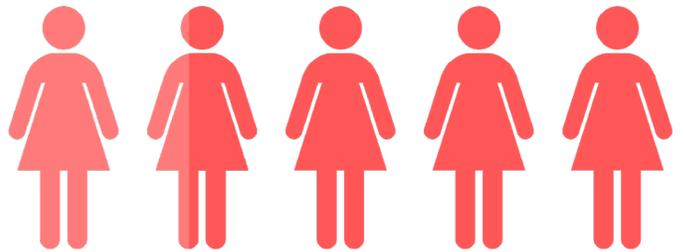
A significant majority (72.1%) of survey respondents identified their gender as male, closely paralleling the 73.5% of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness who identified as male during the 2022 PIT count. Additionally, there was a notable similarity in the proportions of people identifying as female, with the 2022 PIT count reporting 25.8%, and the 2023 Homeless Survey indicating 26.6% of respondents identifying as female.

These findings underscore the consistency in gender representation among individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness between the 2022 PIT count and the 2023 Homeless Survey. This alignment emphasizes the importance of ensuring homelessness resources and programs are equipped to serve male and female participants appropriately with proper resource allocation.

Roughly 72% identified as male



Roughly 26% identified as female



Sexual Orientation

This survey marks a significant milestone as it represents the County's inaugural effort to collect data regarding sexual orientation among the unsheltered homeless population. This data collection on sexual orientation highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals within the homeless community. The findings emphasize the need for targeted support and resources that are inclusive and sensitive to the specific needs of this demographic in Orange County's efforts to address homelessness.

Sexual Orientation Breakdown Throughout the Population

This survey represents the first time the County has collected data regarding sexual orientation.

Do they identify as LGBTQ+?	Percent of Respondents
No	93.6%
Yes	5.0%
Client Doesn't Know / Declined To Answer	1.4%

If Yes, which of the following best represents their Sexual Orientation?	Percent of Respondents
Bisexual	40.6%
Gay	25.0%
Lesbian	15.6%
Pansexual	6.3%
Questioning	3.1%
Asexual	0.0%
Queer	0.0%
Client Doesn't Know / Declined To Answer	9.4%



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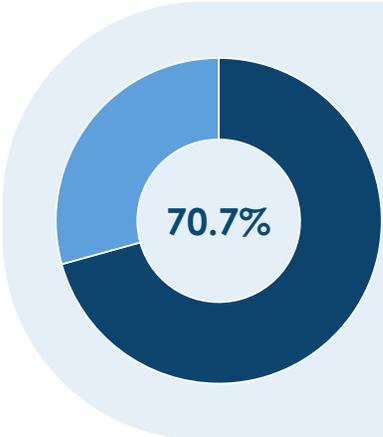
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DEMOGRAPHICS

LIVING CONDITIONS

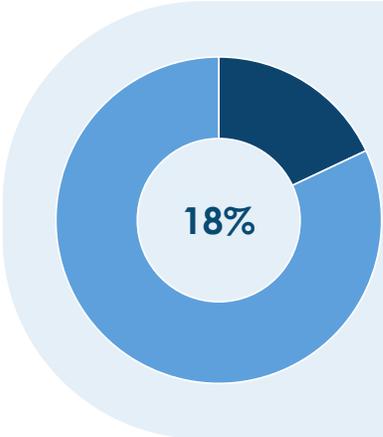
The purpose of the 2023 Homeless Survey was to gain an accurate understanding of the sleeping conditions of people who appeared to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness the night prior to survey completion. Based on their responses, the survey classified survey respondents into three living conditions: experiencing unsheltered homelessness, sheltered homelessness and unstably housed or at risk of homelessness. More than 91% of respondents reported sleeping in locations that categorized them as experiencing unsheltered homelessness, while nearly 4% indicated they were in locations classified as sheltered. Additionally, approximately 5% of respondents reported sleeping in places that were categorized as unstable housing and/or at risk of homelessness.





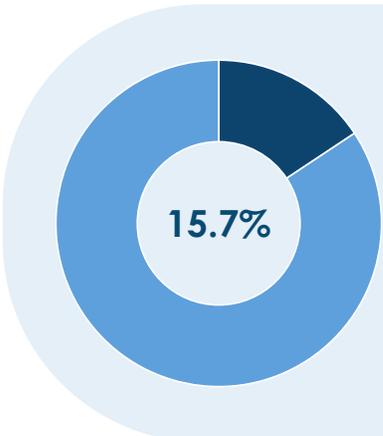
Outdoors

In response to the question about their overnight sleeping location, 70.7% of respondents reported they had spent the previous night outdoors. Among those who reported sleeping outdoors, 76.1% stated they had slept outdoors with only a blanket or sleeping bag, while an additional 9.8% reported sleeping outdoors in a tent and another 9.6% opted for tent-like structures for their overnight accommodations.



Vehicles

Nearly 18% of survey respondents reported sleeping in a vehicle the previous night. Among those, 86.7% specified the vehicle was a car, van, truck or camper. Additionally, 12.4% reported spending the night in a recreational vehicle (RV) lacking access to sewer, water and electricity. The lack of access to sewer, water and electricity is a characterization of unsheltered homelessness in accordance with HUD.



Encampments

When inquiring about spending the previous night outdoors in an encampment, 15.7% of survey respondents confirmed they had slept in an encampment. For the purposes of the 2023 Homeless Survey, an encampment is defined as "...a place where multiple people stay for a continuous time with built structures and personal belongings," in accordance with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). This question looked to examine whether people experiencing unsheltered homelessness stayed with others in a communal setting.



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HEALTH INSURANCE

HEALTH INSURANCE

Health insurance is a critical factor in obtaining healthcare treatment for physical and behavioral health conditions experienced by people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Without insurance, the cost of healthcare can be a significant barrier to accessing essential medical care. Those who are uninsured may not be able to access timely treatment, potentially leading to untreated conditions and further health concerns. According to the 2023 Homeless Survey, 85.1% of respondents reported having health insurance. Among those with health insurance, 90.6% had Medi-Cal and 8.5% had Medicare. Of those with Medi-Cal, 82.6% indicated their Medi-Cal was managed through CalOptima Health.





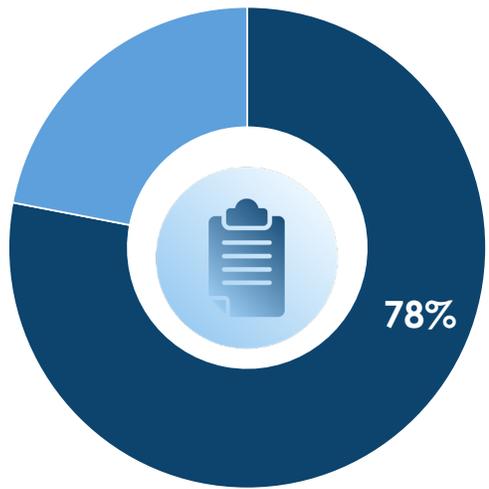
FINDINGS

The Office of Care Coordination worked with the Ad Hoc Committee to review the data produced by the 2023 Homeless Survey and developed a list of findings that provided insight into homelessness efforts that are working or not working, as well as feedback from the unsheltered homeless population. Additionally, questions from the 2023 Homeless Survey are referenced in support of the detailed findings and provide additional context.

1. People Experiencing Homelessness Want Help

The 2023 Homeless Survey was created to understand why people who are experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Orange County, an area that has an extensive network for services, are perceivably not engaging in services and accepting available help. Largely, the feedback received through the 2023 Homeless Survey indicated people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are engaging and accepting services, and are interested in improving their lives to end their homelessness. Additionally, it was clear the type of service and/or resource provided and the way it is presented to survey respondents is important. Although universally people are interested in services and/or resources to improve their lives, each person has a unique set of needs that can be addressed by specific services and/or resources they will accept. It is important the larger homeless service system has a variety of services and resources that will meet the interests and needs of the overall population.

Willingness to engage with in the 2023 Homeless Survey, the County's System of Care, the homeless service system and the acceptance services can be measured through a variety of questions and responses received throughout the survey. Overall, 93% of respondents reported they were actively receiving a benefit and/or enrolled in a program to help address a condition related to their homelessness, and an additional 2% stated their interest in receiving services and/or resources.



Survey Engagement

Over 76% of the people engaged by City Net resulted in a completed survey. This is higher than City Net's reported survey completion average, which is reported to be in the low 70%.

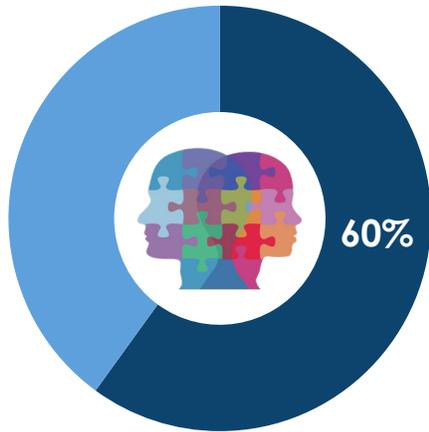
Additionally, 78.4% of survey respondents were willing to provide their first name, last name and date of birth to allow the survey team to conduct further research and analysis utilizing the County's databases and other data resources.

This high level of survey engagement serves to debunk the myth that people experiencing homelessness are interested in anonymity and/or are highly skeptical in providing personal identifying information.



Supportive Service Engagement

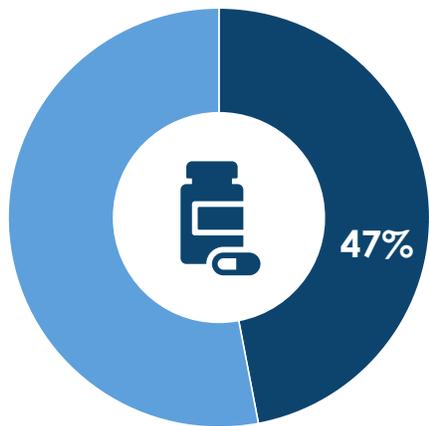
When asked about current enrollment or interest in enrollment of supportive services to address health and/or a reported ongoing disabling condition which impacts their ability to live independently, the 2023 Homeless Survey results showed the majority of people were either currently enrolled in a program to address the need or were interested but could not access the service.



60% of respondents reported having a mental illness that was ongoing and impacted their ability to live independently.

This includes 37.7% of survey respondents who reported having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 51.3% reported having a serious mental illness, other than PTSD. Nearly 25% of survey respondents reported receiving treatment for mental health concerns or visiting a mental health professional in the past 12 months.

Furthermore, 58.3% of survey respondents stated they either were receiving services for their mental health or were interested in treatment but could not access it.



Nearly 47% of survey respondents reported having a substance use disorder that was ongoing and impacted their ability to live independently.

Similar to those who reported experiencing a mental health condition, 49.0% of the respondents who reported having a substance use disorder stated they were receiving treatment for their substance use disorder or were interested in treatment but could not access it.

However, only 16.4% reported receiving treatment for alcohol or drug related issues in the past 12 months.

When asked about primary healthcare, 64% of all respondents stated they had received treatment for a medical concern or visited a doctor in the last 12 months or wanted to do so, but could not access it.

The survey intentionally did not specifically define the treatment and/or visits to health care professionals that respondents reported accepting, being enrolled in or interested to access, but were unable to. It is fair to assume that the definitions of these terms varied across the survey respondents, likely including very basic, general, one-time services to long term and/or intensive programming. The further defining of specific treatment and/or visits to health care professionals that people experiencing homelessness are interested or engaged in can be an area for future analysis.



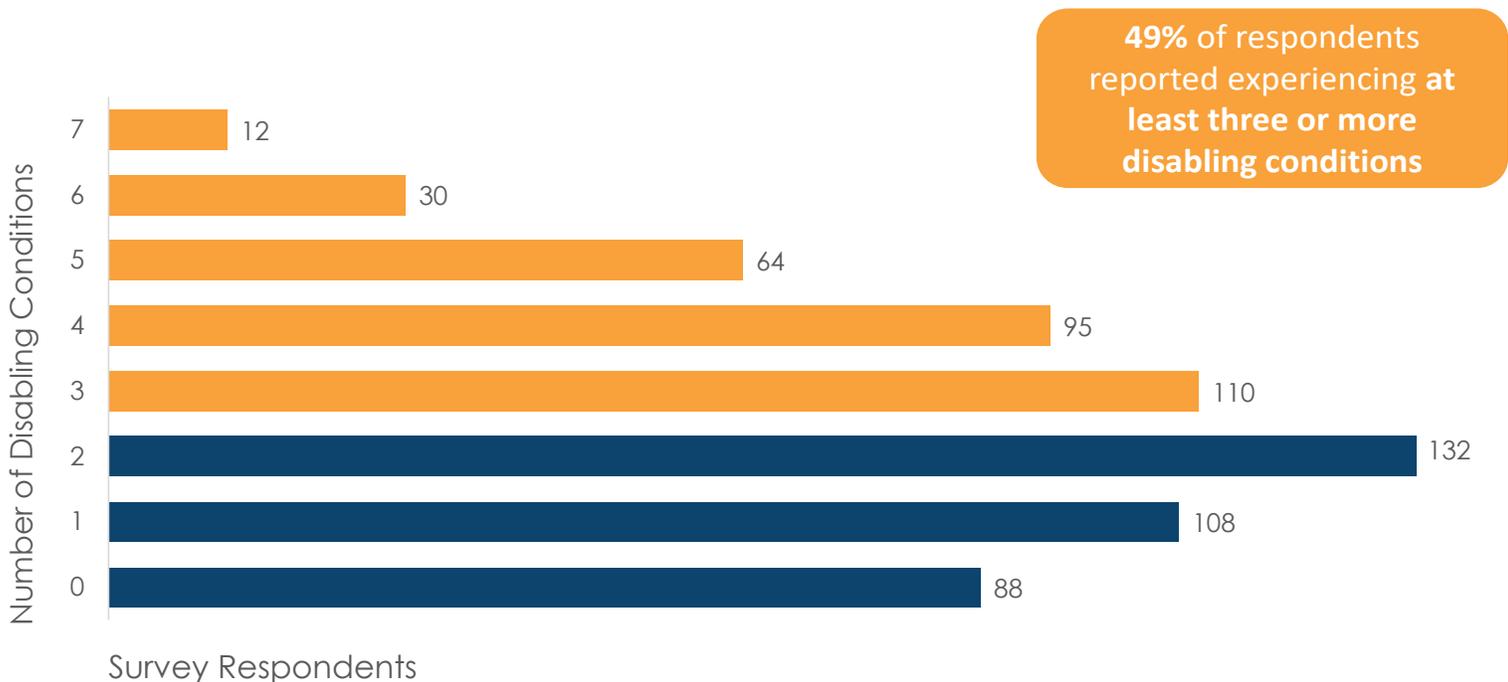
2. Chronic Homelessness and Disabling Conditions are Increasing

Chronic Homelessness among individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness increased from 52.0% in 2019 to 55.1% in 2022 according to the respective PIT Counts. The 2023 Homeless Survey sought to understand if the upward trend continued into 2023. With 81.5% of respondents reporting they have been experiencing homelessness for at least the year or more and a similar percentage of survey respondents reporting experiencing an ongoing disabling condition which affects their ability to live independently, it is not surprising that 69% of survey respondents are experiencing chronic homelessness as defined by HUD. This is a 14% increase, when comparing the 2022 PIT with the 2023 Homeless Survey. It is important to remember the purpose and methodology of the 2022 PIT and 2023 Homeless Survey are slightly different. The PIT is a count of all the people experiencing homelessness on one night, while the 2023 Homeless Survey is a targeted to survey 20% of the overall population gaining valuable insight into their experiences and preferences.

Disabling Conditions

To gain insight into the disabling conditions that people are experiencing and help determine if a person meets HUD's definition of chronic homelessness, the 2023 Homeless Survey asked about seven different disabling conditions. Respondents were asked whether they were currently experiencing these conditions and if these conditions were ongoing and impacted their ability to live independently.

The following summarizes the findings for five main areas that encompass these seven disabling conditions. Overall, 86.2% of respondents reported experiencing at least one disabling condition, with just under 70% of survey respondents reporting experiencing at least two disabling conditions and almost half (49%) reporting experiencing at least three or more.





Mental Illness

Of survey respondents, 60% reported experiencing an ongoing mental illness which impacts their ability to live independently. Although there was a markedly different question structure, the 2022 PIT Count reported 29.5% of the unsheltered population experiencing an ongoing mental illness.

Several factors might contribute to this disparity. Primarily, the variance in the questions posed in the 2023 Homeless Survey could be a key factor as the 2022 PIT Count simply inquired whether individuals were experiencing a “mental illness or emotional impairment,” whereas the 2023 Homeless Survey delved into two distinct aspects: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and serious mental illness other than PTSD.



2022 PIT Count
29.5%
REPORTED EXPERIENCING AN
ONGOING MENTAL ILLNESS



2023 Survey
60%
REPORTED EXPERIENCING AN
ONGOING MENTAL ILLNESS

Moreover, the 2023 Homeless Survey benefited from the involvement of trained homeless service professionals who have expertise and knowledge in conducting more extensive survey interviews. This additional time allowed for the establishment of trust and rapport between the surveyors and respondents, potentially leading to more candid responses.

In light of these considerations, it is reasonable to assert that the percentage of individuals experiencing mental illness, as reported in the 2023 Homeless Survey, offers a more accurate representation of the impact of mental health conditions and challenges on people enduring unsheltered homelessness compared to the figures from the 2022 PIT Count.



Substance Use



Survey respondents were asked about the presence of a substance use disorder which was ongoing and impacted their ability to live independently. The 2022 PIT Count revealed 41.7% of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness reported a substance use disorder as a disabling condition. The 2023 Homeless Survey reported an increase to 47%. There was no difference in wording between the 2023 Homeless Survey and the 2022 PIT Count regarding substance use disorder.



Physical Disability

Nearly 42% of survey respondents reported having a physical disability that is ongoing and impacts them from living independently. This figure reflects a distinct 10% increase when compared to the 32.2% reported for individuals experiencing long-lasting physical disabilities while facing unsheltered homelessness in the 2022 PIT Count.



Developmental Disability

In response to inquiries regarding developmental disabilities, 22.1% of survey respondents acknowledged such conditions. This marks a 7.8% variance from the 14.3% who reported similar experiences during the 2022 PIT Count.



Chronic Physical Illness

Among the survey respondents, 42.1% reported a chronic physical illness that is ongoing and impacts their ability to live independently. This disabling condition was not included in the 2022 PIT Count, rendering it impossible to draw a direct comparison.

Overall Disabling Conditions

Across all five categories of disabling conditions: mental illness, substance use, chronic physical illness, physical disability, and developmental disability — a substantial portion of survey respondents indicated having ongoing conditions that impact their ability to live independently. As previously highlighted in this section, a staggering 70% of survey respondents answered affirmatively to at least two of the seven questions related to disabling conditions, with just under half reporting three or more disabling conditions that are ongoing and impact their ability to live independently.

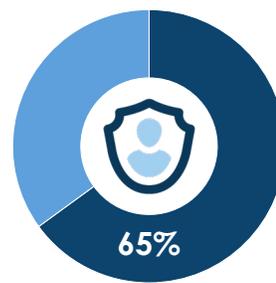
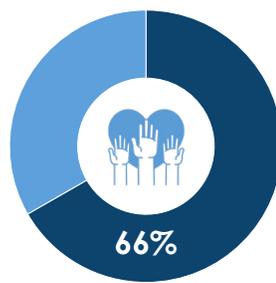
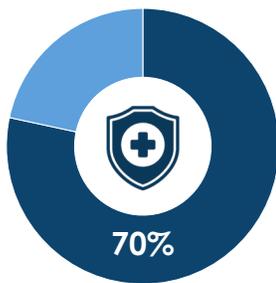
Comparatively, the 2022 PIT Count focused on percentages of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and four disabling conditions (serious mental illness or emotional impairment, substance use disorder, long-lasting physical disability and developmental disability) mirroring the categories assessed in this report. In each of the four categories, the 2023 Homeless Survey had significantly greater percentages of survey respondents report each of these disabling conditions compared to the 2022 PIT Count. While various factors may contribute to these discrepancies, it is believed these increased percentages are not an over representation of the population experiencing these disabling conditions, but are a more accurate reflection of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness with disabling conditions.



3. Safety, Respect & Personal Space are most Important when Considering Shelter or Transitional Housing

With the addition of over 1,000 new emergency shelter beds in Orange County of the last five years, access to emergency shelter has greatly increased for single adults and adult only households in need. Understanding that increased access to emergency shelter beds has most likely resulted in a high majority of people experiencing unsheltered homeless either having a previous stay in a shelter program or being offered a shelter bed, the 2023 Homeless Survey sought to understand why people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are not currently utilizing emergency shelter or transitional housing. The 2023 Homeless Survey asked survey respondents about their experience with shelter programs, what factors they considered when thinking about accessing emergency shelter or transitional housing and what might keep them from accepting it.

Out of the 586 survey respondents who reported experiencing unsheltered homelessness, 46.9% reported a previous stay in an emergency shelter or transitional housing. Of those that had previously stayed at an emergency shelter or transitional housing, there was a range of reasons for leaving the programs. The most common response reported was “left the program involuntarily” (36.7%). Due to the survey methodology, some survey respondents selected this option without being able to provide further context. Among the 50 out of 101 respondents that provided more context to this answer, 44 report the involuntary exit was due to the program ending and the other 6 stated they were discharged. The top other four reasons for leaving the program voluntarily were related to environment and relationships, specifically rules being too difficult to follow (16.7%), concerns about feeling unsafe in the program (13.8%), concerns regarding staff at the program (13.1%) and privacy (11%).



Conversely, when survey respondents were asked about the features they considered when considering accessing an emergency shelter or transitional housing program the top three factors were safety and/or a safe environment (70.5%), the shelter operator being respectful, empathetic, helpful and well regarded (66.7%) and amount of personal and private space provided at the shelter (65.2%). The ability to receive housing navigation assistance to identify and secure permanent housing was also considered important to 63.0% of survey respondents.

Finally, all survey respondents experiencing unsheltered homelessness were asked why they were not currently utilizing an emergency shelter or transitional housing program. The most common reason cited was a lack of available beds (25.4%). This was followed by concerns about feeling unsafe (16.7%), not knowing how to access the emergency shelter or transitional housing programs (15.9%), concerns around privacy (15.5%) and shelter program rules and policies being too difficult to follow (13.8%). Survey respondents consistently highlighted safety, feeling respected by staff, program rules and privacy as strong factors in consideration to either accessing shelters or reasons for exiting them.



4. Less than Half of the People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness Report Engaging with an Outreach Worker or Case Manager in the last Three Months

For most people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, the main access point to resources and services is through interactions with outreach teams and case management programs. The 2023 Homeless Survey sought to capture information on the frequency and quality of these interactions.

Survey respondents were first asked about recent (in the last three months) interactions with an outreach worker or case manager. Nearly 48% of survey respondents reported engaging with an outreach worker or case manager in the last three months. The 2023 Homeless Survey did not inquire about the specific organization or agency affiliation of the outreach worker or case manager they engaged with.

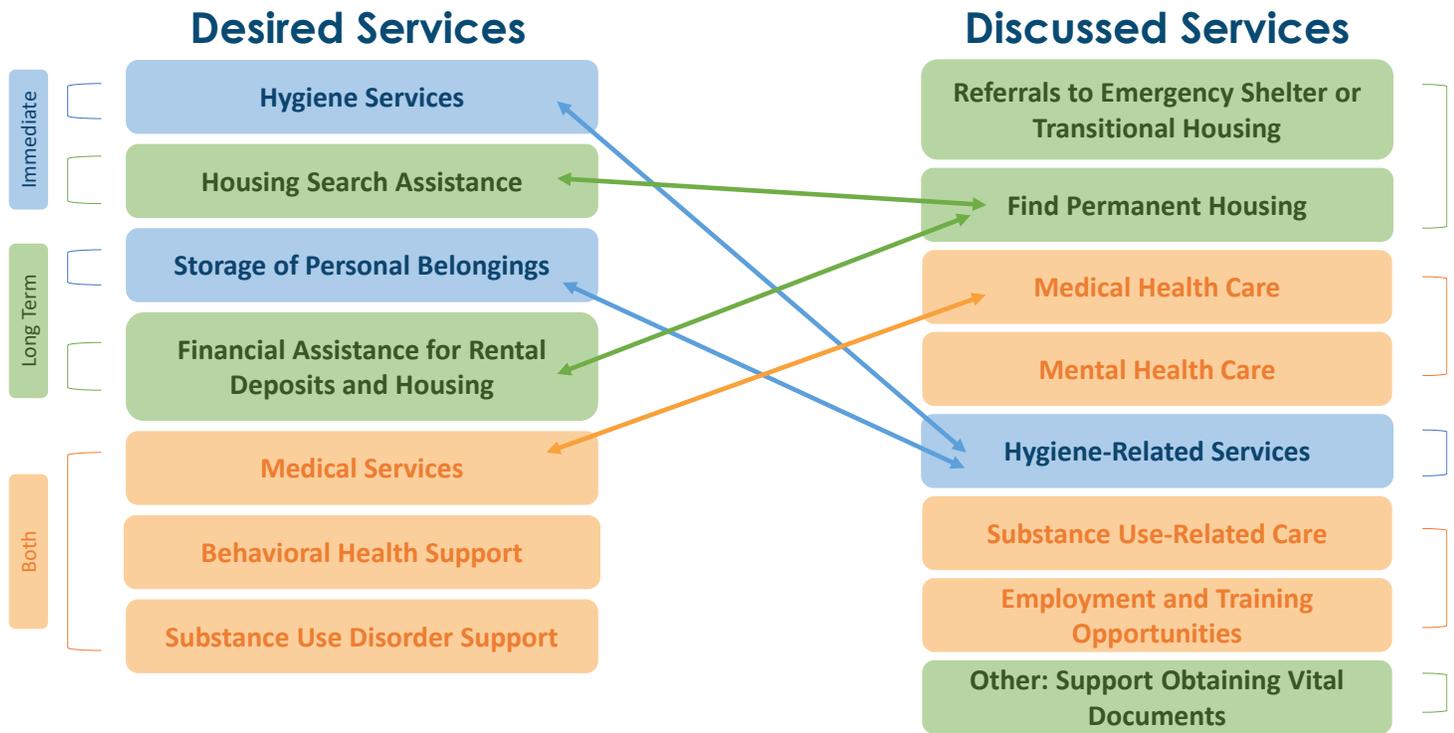
Survey respondents who reported being approached by a street outreach worker or case manager in the last three months were asked about the various services discussed during these interactions. The information recorded from this inquiry provided the option to select multiple services, as opposed to limiting the option to one or a few. Approximately three-quarters (74.3%) of survey respondents stated that they discussed or received information about referrals to shelter or transitional housing and nearly half (46.4%) reported finding permanent housing as the next highest service discussed. The next three most frequently discussed services were related to medical healthcare (21.1%), mental health care (18.6%) and hygiene-related services (17.9%). Nearly 13% of respondents reported discussing substance use-related care during their interactions with outreach workers or case managers.

When asked whether the case manager or outreach worker they engaged with in the last three months successfully connected them to any service, 42.9% of survey respondents reported a connection to a service. Overall, 20.4% of survey respondents experiencing unsheltered homelessness were able to connect to a service through an outreach worker or case manager in the last three months. The top services that respondents reported being connected to (with the option to select multiple services) were referrals to emergency shelter or transitional housing (47.5%) and services related to finding permanent housing (30.0%). This was followed by services for medical health care (15.8%), assistance obtaining vital documents (13.3%), mental health care (11.7%), hygiene-related services or products (8.3%) and substance use related care (5.8%).

Lastly, survey respondents experiencing unsheltered homelessness were asked about services that would be helpful to them while experiencing homelessness. The 2023 Homeless Survey recorded multiple services as reported by survey respondents as opposed to limiting answers to one or a few. The top responses included hygiene services (81.6%) and housing search assistance (76.8%). These were followed by the need for storage of personal belongings (72.0%) and financial assistance for rental deposits and housing (66.2%). Sixty-one percent of survey respondents reported medical services, while 51.2% and 44.7% expressed the desire for behavioral health support and substance use disorder support, respectively.



4. Less Than Half of the People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness Report Engaging with an Outreach Worker or Case Manager in the last Three Months (cont.)



When comparing the top responses the 2023 Homeless Survey received in regard to what services outreach workers and case managers discussed with respondents in the last three months and the top responses to the question of what services would be most helpful while experiencing homelessness, there were significant variances between the two sets of responses. As reported above, the top responses related to services outreach workers and case managers discussed with respondents were focused on housing whereas hygiene services ranked fifth. When looking at the top responses for services that respondents said would be helpful while experiencing homelessness, the top and third most popular responses were hygiene services and storage of personal belongings, respectively. The second and fourth responses were related to housing and shelter. The highest rated service respondents reported needing ranked as the fifth most popular service discussed with them by an outreach worker or case manager. Additionally, the mixture of both medium to long term services (i.e., shelter and housing) and immediate services (hygiene services and storage of belongings) provide an example of the dynamic needs that individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness often are facing.



5. People Tend to Stay in One Area that is Familiar to them when Experiencing Homelessness

The 2023 Homeless Survey aimed to gain insights into individuals' connections with the community and their reasons for choosing specific locations for where they spend the majority of their time experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The 2023 Homeless Survey included questions about where they spent most of their time while experiencing homelessness, if they had family in the area and the locations of their current and past employment and educational histories. These questions provided a comprehensive understanding of the connections survey respondents have with the city, region and county.

When survey respondents were asked the reason why they chose a particular location, area and/or city to stay in during their time experiencing unsheltered homelessness, over 85% of people gave a reason related to familiarity, relationships or safety. Over half (51.7%) of survey respondents indicated the location chosen was due to its familiarity. The next two most common responses were having a friend or family member in the area (18.8%) and feeling safe in the location (15.2%).

The 2023 Homeless Survey also inquired about the means by which individuals arrived at the location they spent the majority of time experiencing homelessness, with 85.6% reporting reaching that location independently. Only 12% reported receiving assistance, either from a family member (6.4%) or a third party (5.6%).



Last Address

77% reported that their last permanent address was in Orange County.



Time Spent While Experiencing Homelessness

97% reported spending the most amount of their time while homeless in Orange County.



Family

57% reported having family in Orange County.



Schooling

62% reported either attending or having attended school in Orange County.



Employment

80% reported current or past employment in Orange County.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Office of Care Coordination worked with the Ad Hoc Committee to review the data produced by the 2023 Homeless Survey to develop a list of recommendations which provided tangible next steps and directions to stakeholders on how to address homelessness efforts in a more effective manner. The following recommendations were presented at the October 18, 2023, meeting of the Commission.

1. Evaluate and Implement Strategic Outreach Practices to Maximize Engagement of People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness

Based on Finding #4 which stated less than half of survey respondents reported engaging with an outreach worker or case manager in the last three months, it is recommended street outreach and case management program administrators collaborate to create a comprehensive outreach and canvassing strategy. This strategy will help increase the likelihood that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness will be engaged by a trained street outreach and/or case management professional and begin the engagement process for services. The comprehensive outreach and canvassing strategy should include extended hours of operations each day of the week, such as early mornings and late evenings, and ensure that 100% of the geographic area of Orange County is covered. Additionally, specific geographic strategies and the identification of defined roles and responsibilities for the variety of stakeholders (i.e. street outreach, case managers, law enforcement, first responders, property owner, etc.) should be identified in a comprehensive street outreach strategy.

2. Ensure Supportive Services are Low Barrier and Accessible

Access to supportive services are needed and wanted by people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, based on the following data points below:

95% Reported accepting or wanting supportive services

85% Reported at least one disabling condition that is ongoing and affecting their ability to live independently

85% Reported having health insurance

Supportive services with a high enrollment rate by people experiencing unsheltered homelessness should be further analyzed in order to determine the unique characteristics which make these services successful and identify best practices that can be replicated. Additionally, the County, cities and stakeholders should continually and increasingly invest in these supportive services.



3. Shelters should Operate under a Trauma Informed Model - Prioritizing Safety, Respect and Personal Space

The investment and creation of emergency shelter beds is one of the primary reasons for the decrease in unsheltered homelessness Orange County has seen in the past few years. However, emergency shelter beds require continuous funding to operate, and operations have become increasingly expensive. For these reasons, it is critical for emergency shelter programs to be efficient and effective at welcoming people experiencing homelessness indoors and to work to end their homelessness as quickly as possible. Based on Finding #3, which states safety, respect and personal space are the most important attributes for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness when considering accessing emergency shelter or transitional housing, the Trauma-Informed Model is recommended. A Trauma Informed Model creates a more welcoming environment and ensures perceived barriers to access and hesitancy based on operational models are limited. The County of Orange Standards of Care for Emergency Shelter Providers (Standards of Care), which all shelters receiving County funding must adhere to, have several provisions to ensure achievement with, and contextualize attributes of, the Trauma-Informed model.

4. Continue to Invest in Permanent Supportive Housing

Both nationally and locally, permanent supportive housing has demonstrated itself to be the most effective permanent housing approach to serve people who have previously experienced chronic homelessness. The Orange County Housing Funding Strategy specifically utilizes the 2019 and 2022 PIT Count data on the percentage of people experiencing chronic homelessness to identify the number of permanent supportive housing units needed to address homelessness in Orange County. As such, with the growing number of people that are experiencing chronic homelessness there is an increased need for permanent supportive housing, which provides both housing and critical supportive stabilizing services to address the ongoing disabling conditions that impacts people's ability to live independently.

5. Provide Services and Resources to the People Experiencing Homelessness in your Community

With 90% of survey respondents reporting having spent most of their time homeless in the city or a neighboring city of the city they were surveyed in and over 80% of survey respondents reporting they have been experiencing homelessness for more than one year, jurisdiction's main focus should be serving the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in their community. Having restrictive criteria and requirements to engage in supportive services creates an isolating environment for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and further increases the length of the time people experience homelessness. Utilizing indicators which on a city level do not yield "ties" (such as last permanent address, family ties, education and employment histories) will prohibit communities from achieving the goal of effectively addressing and ending homelessness. Less than 30% of survey respondents reported having familial, employment or educational ties to the city they were surveyed in while experiencing unsheltered homelessness.