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Hawaii homelessness hits 5-year high

The isles have 7,620 people who live without housing, a state report finds

By [B.J. Reyes](#)

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The number of homeless in Hawaii increased to its highest level in five years, boosted by a dramatic jump in the number of unsheltered homeless individuals, who now outnumber the sheltered, according to data released Thursday by the state.

Overall, the 2015 Statewide Homeless Point in Time Count pegged the number of homeless in Hawaii at 7,620, up from 6,918 a year ago. That figure included 3,843 individuals counted as unsheltered homeless, compared with 3,777 counted as sheltered. The tally was conducted Jan. 25.

“It is clear that we must collaborate with the counties to address the rising numbers of homeless individuals and families across the state,” Gov. David Ige said in a news release. “I fully support the Housing First Initiative and similar programs that provide transitional and permanent emergency housing, job training, referral services for mental illness and addiction and other social services.”

Among the counties, only Kauai showed a decrease in the overall number of homeless individuals, with 339 in 2015, down from 378 the previous year. In 2011, the first year of the Point in Time survey, Kauai counted 336 homeless.

The homeless population on Oahu rose to 4,903, up from 4,712. Hawaii island counted 1,241 homeless, up from 869 in 2014, and Maui’s count of 1,137 was up from 959.

The Point in Time Count, which was prepared by the state Department of Human Services Homeless Programs Office, represents a cross section of homelessness statewide.

The report recommended, among other things, to designate a lead coordinator in different regions and delineate clear responsibilities. The lead coordinator would work with regional coordinators to develop timelines with responsibilities clearly outlined for each region.

It also recommended hiring skilled data entry workers to more accurately record data on unsheltered individuals.

Other recommendations for improving the count included identifying harder-to-reach areas, working to develop more of a presence in those areas and asking police to delay sweeps until the count is complete. Improving coordination with authorities to strengthen security and improve accessibility into harder-to-reach areas also was recommended.

Scott Morishige, executive director of Honolulu advocacy group Protecting Hawaii’s Ohana, Children, Under Served, Elderly and Disabled, cautioned that the increase could be attributed to better methodology and counting methods, which have improved since the count first began.

He said his group, known as PHOCUSED, has been working on ways to get more people to take advantage of vacancies in shelters.

“I think, ultimately, permanent rental housing is the answer, especially since we continue to see a high number of shelter vacancies — at least on Oahu,” Morishige said. “It seems like the state is following a similar trend to Oahu, where the sheltered homeless population appears to be decreasing while the unsheltered numbers appear to be growing.”

Jenny Lee, public policy director of the nonprofit Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice, said the increase was not surprising, given the rise in housing and rental costs in Hawaii. Data from other homeless service organizations indicate that the growing numbers of homeless are people who are living in Hawaii as residents before becoming homeless, she said.

“In terms of the increase in the unsheltered, it reminds us that the traditional system isn’t necessarily working for everybody and has its role, but we need to continue to shift the focus toward immediately placing people into permanent housing with the services that they need,” Lee said.

The advocates said the survey gives policymakers better insight to the scope of the homeless issue and a potential guide on how to attack the problem.

“The increase indicates we need to change our approach to really go full force on permanent housing, and we’ve taken the steps in that direction but it’s not been enough to turn the tide,” Lee said.

State Rep. Dee Morikawa, chairwoman of the House Human Services Committee, said she also was not surprised by the increase, adding that lawmakers were aware of the growing homeless problem as they were crafting policies last session.

She said she expected the Point in Time survey to be useful.

“I think that it should put more priority into the homeless issue next session,” said Morikawa (D, Niihau-Koloa-Kokee).

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