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FEATURED TOPICAL

More people are without homes, count shows

By ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH STAFF WRITER

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Cynthia Voortman, co-founder of On the Spot Aid Inc., gives out bike lights during the Point in Time Count while at 100 Church in North Port in January.

GONDOLIER PHOTO BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH

After losing their rentals, some people in Sarasota County are living in vehicles or on the streets, according to a recent study.



Each year the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness Inc. conducts and compiles a point-in-time count of people without housing on behalf of the Sarasota/Manatee Continuum of Care.

The count is designed to give a snapshot of the situation in Sarasota and Manatee counties on a single night, Jan. 24 to Jan. 25.

The count for both counties showed people living without a residence increased by 41.6% from 2020 to 2022. There were 544 in Sarasota County, including 222 in the city of Sarasota.

The Suncoast Partnership study found the current housing market increased homelessness due to lease non-renewals or exorbitant increases in rental rates, inflation and COVID-19 evictions.

“Many have been sleeping in vehicles, storage units, and other places not meant for habitation,” Suncoast Partnership CEO Chris Johnson said. “Our community has seen a historic increase in both housing costs and in inflation.”

Inflation is 10.5% in the region, topping the national average of 8.5%, he said.

[ApartmentList.com](#) ranked the Sarasota-Manatee area as the “fastest-increasing

rents in the nation,” earlier this year, although the numbers have calmed in the last two months.

“We are seeing local rents increasing by 50-100% for some of our most vulnerable citizens,” Johnson said. “These drastic increases are not only impacting those who are low-income or extremely-low-income, but it has impacted our workforce of nurses, police officers, fire fighters, paramedics, teachers, hospitality workers and others.”

Many area people across all socioeconomic levels are now facing homelessness for the first time in their lives, he said.

Cynthia Voortman, co-founder of On The Spot Aid, a program serving medical needs to people without homes in Englewood and North Port, says she’s seeing new people to the situation.

“There are people adjusting to being homeless for the first time ever,” she said.

Voortman and co-founder Bonnie Saxman treat the people involved for wounds and help with after care when a patient leaves the hospital and doesn’t have a home to return to and instead lives in the woods or in vehicles.

“Because of our weekly street medicine outreach, we know the recorded numbers represent only a part of that population,” Voortman said of volunteering during the PIT count.

NUMBERS NOT BROKEN DOWN

Voortman requested the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness give the breakdown of homeless in South County.



However, Johnson said it's not possible.

"Years ago, before I worked here, it was questioned if the information gathered from locations in the county were accurate," Johnson said. "For example, was a person counted on the Charlotte County border of Englewood instead of on the Sarasota side?"

He said it's understood that those involved can be transient, living in one community or another. That's why the work is considered a "snapshot."

"We break it down in the area where there's a shelter in the city of Sarasota, and then the rest of the county," he said.

According to Suncoast Partnership, the methodology of using the city of Sarasota and then lumping all other towns in helps gather information from emergency shelters, transitional housing and in "known areas" where unsheltered homeless persons gather.

PIT volunteers were trained to ask if the person is battling drug or alcohol addiction, physical or developmental disability, a chronic health condition, mental health issues or HIV/AIDS.

They were asked if they need food, housing placement, day care, legal aide, health care, education, substance abuse services, case management, employment or mental health services.

Johnson said the count allows the Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness to look at "trends" by using consistent methodology.

The count is used to evaluate the impact of a community's implementation of best practices and the health of the Homeless Crisis Response System with the goal of

“rehousing the homeless.”

Unlike in Sarasota, there are no shelters in Englewood or North Port. There’s also limited available low-income rentals to help those on the verge of losing their residence. The average rental is \$1,800 to \$2,200 a month.

Voortman and Saxman say they counted about 34 in Englewood and three people in North Port. Some said they needed local services listed in the survey. However, assistance for in-patient drug treatment, depression and mental health services are hard to come by in South County and aren’t considered affordable.

Johnson said the survey isn’t tabulated by ZIP code or each town. However, the Suncoast Partnership PIT data in 2020 reported two people counted in North Port during the overnight survey.

“The PIT results, along with other data and information, help inform the Sarasota and Manatee Continuum of Care as they plan to address the needs of those who are homeless and those at imminent risk of homelessness,” he said. “Learning the trend is important if you can find a new way of doing things. Our volunteers do an amazing job, without them there would be no PIT count.”

Still, Voortman said having local PIT data would be helpful in explaining the needs of unhoused South County residents.

“We are hopeful that the larger than expected number of those counted is evidence that there is a need and a want for the expansion of services already in place, to reach those in South County.”

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