

Unsheltered homeless number jumps in Dubuque

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Shelby Eipperle



Jeremy Mask

The number of homeless residents counted sleeping outdoors in Dubuque recently was more than double the number at the same time last year.

Community Solutions of Eastern Iowa located 16 unsheltered residents in the city during its annual point-in-time count on Jan. 26, compared to the seven counted last year.

The agency counted two unsheltered residents in Dubuque County in 2019, the same number in 2020 and three residents in 2021.

Rising rents and a shortage of affordable housing are most likely to blame, said Shelby Eipperle, a community services advocate with CSEI, echoing a common refrain among the area's advocates for homeless people.

“Right now, it’s hard to get your feet back under you, things being so expensive,” she said.

On a set day in January, homeless service providers across the country rise before dawn to scour their communities seeking residents living outdoors, with the data being used by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to estimate the total number of homeless people.

Homeless shelters conduct a concurrent Housing Inventory Count of their bed inventory and number of clients staying in their facilities, though that data will not be presented until the spring, according to Patrick Schacherer, who runs Iowa’s Homeless Management Information System at Institute for Community Alliances, which compiles Iowa’s data.

Some area shelters have increased both their beds and number of clients over the past year. Dubuque Rescue Mission had 53 men staying in its facility on Jan. 26 and had nearly doubled its bed capacity from the same time last year after loosening COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and Almost Home, a shelter for men with children, began receiving clients late last year after shuttering in late 2021.

CSEI administers the unsheltered count for Dubuque and Delaware counties, accompanied by city officials, officers from Dubuque’s community-oriented policing division and representatives from area social service agencies.

In preparation for the count, CSEI and its partners coordinate a list of outdoor sites known to host homeless residents — such as industrial parks in Dyersville and hotel and motel parking lots in Manchester — and stockpile sleeping bags, tarps, food, water and other essentials for people living outdoors.

Among the sites advocates visited were a makeshift fort located under a highway bridge and an abandoned mine shaft, said Jeremy Mask, director of care navigation and recovery services at Area Substance Abuse Council.

Advocates approach people showing signs of homelessness to collect demographic data such as names, birthdays, veteran status and their history of homelessness.

“Some were very pleasant. Some didn’t want to talk at all,” said Mask, who participated in the point-in-time count for the first time this year. “The first guy we talked to said, ‘Why are you up here this early? I’m going back to bed.’”

A “touchpoint” breakfast at Dubuque Rescue Mission later in the morning helps collect data from stragglers that the counters missed or anyone who doesn’t feel like chatting at 5 a.m.

While community-oriented police officers participated this year as well as in years past, they do not enforce the city’s ordinance against camping in public spaces during the count, according to Lt. Brendan Welsh, who also participated in the count.

“That’s not something we’re proactively doing,” Welsh said. “Our intent is to let them know what resources are there for them.”

All unsheltered residents found in Dubuque County during the Jan. 26 count were located within Dubuque's city limits, which Eipperle attributed to Dubuque's relative abundance of aid for homeless people. No unsheltered residents were located in Delaware County.

"People who are living unsheltered walk toward where there's resource wealth, and we in Dubuque are fortunate because we are rich in resources," she said, citing the city's warming centers, free meals and historically large supply of available housing compared to smaller communities.

Delaware County has a homeless population, Eipperle said, but those residents are more likely to be "doubled up" staying with family or friends and do not appear in the counts.

The increase in Dubuque falls in line with trends in the homeless population in major cities and across the country, Eipperle said.

"While 16 doesn't seem that much in a big city like Seattle, we are on trend with what's happening with homelessness nationally," she said.

Largely rural areas, such as Dubuque and Delaware counties, have had a 6% increase in the total number of people who are homeless from 2020 to 2022, compared to less than 1% nationwide, per HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report.

Meanwhile, the nationwide total of unsheltered homeless people climbed by 3% in that same time, with major cities seeing an increase of 6%, while rural areas experienced a slight decrease.

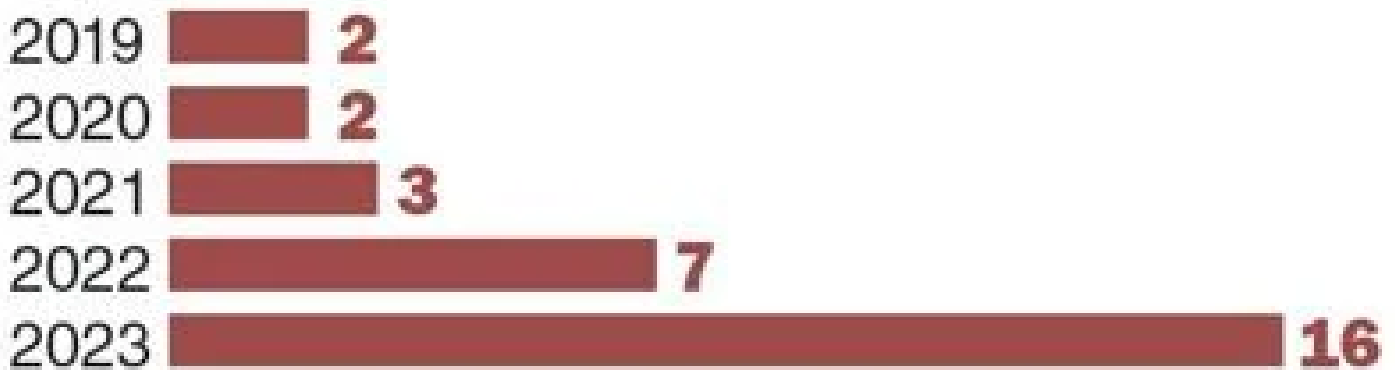
Amanda Reynolds, assistant professor of social work at Loras College and director of Urban Bicycle Food Mission, said the local increase in unsheltered homeless called for a city-led focus group or advisory board.

"The city needs to come up with an empathetic strategy and consider this to be an emergency that needs our attention," she wrote in a text message.

Joshua Irvine is a Report for America corps member and writes about issues related to poverty in the tri-state area for the Telegraph Herald.

Unsheltered homeless

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers people “sleeping in a place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation” to be “unsheltered” homeless. The number of unsheltered homeless in Dubuque County has climbed in recent years, according to local January point-in-time counts.



Source: Institute for Community Alliances, Shelby Eipperle

Numbers of "unsheltered" homeless residents in Dubuque from 2019 to 2023.

Photo by: Mike Day, Telegraph Herald

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