TOGETHER WE CAN SOLVE UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS IN FLORIDA

AMANDA WANDER, DIRECTOR OF ENDING HOMELESSNESS
TIFFANY ADAMS, TECHNICAL ADVISOR

Every January, Homelessness Continuums of Care (CoCs) work with community partners and other local volunteers to conduct a census of those experiencing literal homelessness in their communities, known as the Point in Time (PIT) count.

This data collection project allows a community to understand the basic demographics of their homeless population living on the streets, in cars, in shelters, and in temporary transitional housing programs. Additionally, it allows them to track trends year to year. Following the Count, CoCs submit the aggregated data to HUD for use at the state, federal, and local levels to help plan for more comprehensive housing crisis response systems.

The data is in from all 27 CoCs in Florida. Unfortunately, it shows an increase in homelessness overall. Anecdotally, communities felt this would be the case, and the proof is in the numbers. In 2022, CoCs reported 25,959 people experiencing literal homelessness in Florida on a given night in January, meaning they were living in a place not meant for human habitation (including outdoors or in their car), emergency shelters, transitional housing, and motels paid for by a government or charitable organization.
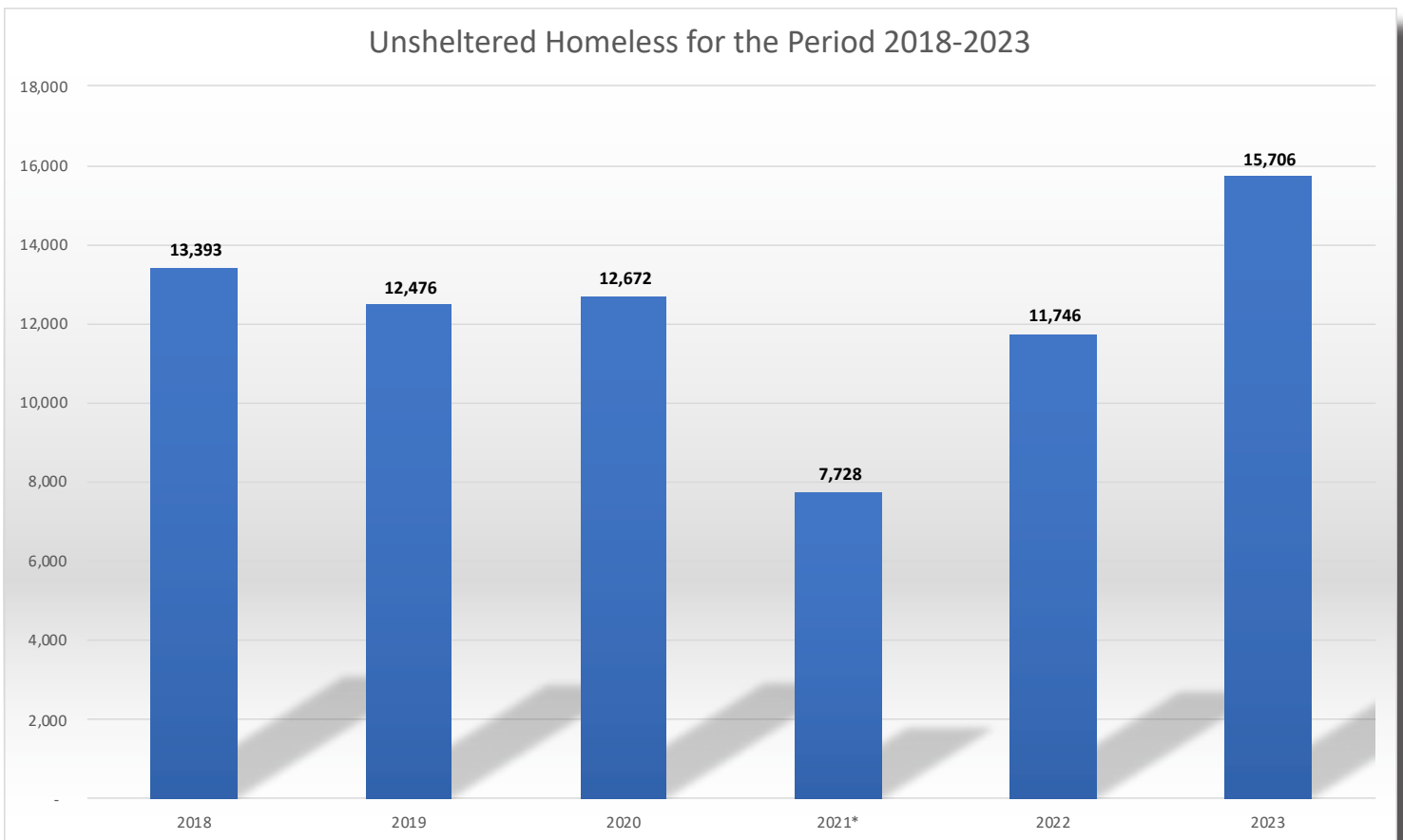
The 2023 PIT Count demonstrated a 2.8% increase, with 30,809 individuals experiencing literal homelessness. Of particular concern to most communities is an increase in visible homelessness, also known as unsheltered homelessness, meaning these community members are sleeping on the streets, in encampments, and in their cars rather than in a shelter, transitional program, or permanent housing of their own.

On that night, half of all people experiencing homelessness were unsheltered. For comparison, in 2018, 43% of all people experiencing homelessness were unsheltered. Additionally, the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness increased by nearly 20% since 2020 (PIT Count data can be found at https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-homeless-populations-and-subpopulations-reports).

Since 2020, Florida has seen enormous increased rental rates, increased evictions, and reduced shelter capacity impacting communities' ability to respond to unsheltered homelessness. Florida has also seen an influx of new residents to Florida, driving up the competition for housing.

The Coalition has worked with various communities to address their unsheltered residents' needs. Experience teaches that a multi-pronged approach and array of solutions are critical to meet short- and long-term needs. We encourage communities to address service and housing needs by bringing together diverse

Unsheltered Homeless for the Period 2018-2023

Year	Count
2018	13,393
2019	12,476
2020	12,672
2021*	7,728
2022	11,746
2023	15,706

In 2021, CoCs could forego an unsheltered count due to the severity of the pandemic and inadequate resources to conduct a full unsheltered count. The data shown in the above graph is from CoC preliminary PIT data reported to HUD. HUD will then verify and publish the final 2023 PIT data later in the year, so this data is subject to change.

partners and developing a comprehensive housing crisis response system consisting of the following components.

1. Outreach and Coordinated Entry
2. Emergency Shelter and Short-Term Crisis Housing
3. Rapid Rehousing and Rental Subsidies
4. Long-term Tenant Based Rental Assistance Vouchers
5. Permanent Supportive Housing
6. Robust Affordable Housing Options for Extremely Low-Income and Very Low-Income households

Equally important to developing a system with these components, each investment in a component must be right-sized to create a system that effectively decreases unsheltered homelessness. For example, investing in street outreach alone will only be effective if permanent supportive housing options are available. Similarly, shelters and transitional housing become ineffective in their purpose as temporary solutions if a community needs more adequate, affordable housing options.

Many communities have invested in various solutions to unsheltered homelessness, such as increasing the capacity of congregate and non-congregate emergency shelters, expanding rental assistance programs like rapid rehousing and emergency rental assistance, increasing street outreach programming, and most importantly, investing in permanently affordable housing options.

Knowing how much to invest in specific services, subsidies, programming, and unit production seems complex, which is true. Still, communities have more data than ever to help support the decision-making and planning process. There are two key data sets that CoCs manage that help determine exactly what people need to solve their episode of homelessness; 1. Coordinated Entry Assessment Data, and 2. Gaps and Needs Assessment Data.

COORDINATED ENTRY ASSESSMENT DATA

CoCs help ensure a unified process is in place to assess and triage people for homeless services and housing programs through their local Coordinated Entry System. This process includes a standardized assessment to determine a household's strengths, challenges, and vulnerabilities in securing and maintaining housing stability. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness often present with several of these strengths, challenges, and vulnerabilities, including vulnerability to an early death. By collecting these standardized assessments, most CoCs can tell you exactly who is experiencing homelessness on any given day and what assistance they need to secure or maintain housing stability.

GAPS AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT DATA

In addition to managing the Coordinated Entry system, CoCs are responsible for conducting a Needs and Gaps Analysis for the housing crisis response system annually. This includes analysis of Coordinated Entry and providers' program data in combination with robust feedback from stakeholders and service providers and must include people's lived experiences. It is important to note that people with lived experiences of homelessness are not a monolithic group, and it is important to ensure that the perspectives of a diverse range of individuals are represented and heard. Additionally, it is important to ensure that people with lived experience are given the necessary resources and support to participate in decision-making processes.

CoCs can use this data collection and analysis to deploy effective strategies, such as:

1. Sufficiently investing in affordable housing production, especially for lower income households
2. Implementing effective local policies and ordinances that promote well-being and do no harm
3. Employing a coordinated community approach informed by best practices
4. Utilizing data to determine the most impactful investments

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Through partnerships built between local governments, service providers, funders, and the CoC, unified solutions to unsheltered homelessness can be reached, and there must be a shared vision among the community and partners about the path forward. There must be a clear, actionable plan with built-in metrics for accountability to advance solutions.

The sight of homelessness is not a measure of a person's worth or ability to make good decisions but rather a measure of how effective we are as a community and society in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable residents in our cities and towns.

AMANDA WANDER is the Director of Ending Homelessness for the Florida Housing Coalition. She previously served as the Executive Director at the Big Bend Continuum of Care where she oversaw the homelessness and housing system of care for eight counties in Florida.

TIFFANY ADAMS is a Technical Advisor for the Florida Housing Coalition. She previously served at the CoC Lead Agency, Changing Homelessness, as the Direct Client Services Team Lead in the Duval, Clay, and Nassau counties ESG-CV implementation.