

Data: 'Significant racial inequities' in Missoula's homeless system

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The sanctioned camp for homeless people near Buckhouse Bridge in Missoula has been operating at an average capacity of around 25 residents every day since it was created in December of 2020, according to Emily Armstrong, the city's Reaching Home program manager.

The Temporary Safe Outdoor Space, as the site is called, was created during the pandemic with the help of United Way of Missoula County, Hope Rescue Mission, the Human Resource Council, the county and the city.

“And more initiatives are coming down the pike as we see a greater need at both the city and county level,” Armstrong said, noting that city and county staff are reviewing possible locations for more sanctioned camps as part of Operation Shelter.

She and other housing experts with the city, the county and the Poverello Center homeless shelter gave an online update and presentation on Tuesday on efforts to alleviate homelessness.

Armstrong said there are “significant racial inequities” in the Missoula Coordinated Entry System, the program designed to divert households and individuals from entering the homeless system.

For example, 91% of the total Missoula population is white, but white people only account for 63% of the people who interact with the coordinated entry system, she said.

“The Native American and Alaskan population is 1.6% in Missoula, but 14.5% of people who are houseless are Native American or Alaskan, which is an exponential increase,” Armstrong said.

Native Americans and Alaskans account for a third of all deaths of homeless people in Missoula’s coordinated entry system between 2017 and July 2021, she said. That means 11 of the 36 deaths have been Native Americans or Alaskans, while two deaths were African-American and 23 deaths were white people. Many more homeless people have died in that time in Missoula that were not in the coordinated entry system and are thus not accounted for in the data.

Missoula is only .8% African-American, but 3.4% of people in the coordinated entry system are African-American.

“This is something that is really disturbing and significant in our work,” Armstrong explained. “And it’s something that we are prioritizing in our houseless services and are trying to build better services to respond to that.”

She also noted that people in Montana can expect to live to an average age of 78.7, but a Native American homeless person in Missoula can expect to live only to age 48.

“We’re trying to create systems and structures that are responsive to that race data,” Armstrong said.

Next year will mark the end of Reaching Home: Missoula’s 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, which was created in 2012. Armstrong said over the next year, a broad coalition of public and private partners will evaluate “where we failed” and look at solutions toward ending homelessness.

She pointed to areas where the city and county have had success, including the ongoing construction of 400 new affordable housing units by the Missoula

Housing Authority, Homewood and other partners. There will be 200 units in the Villagio buildings and another 200 units in The Trinity Apartments.

Some staff positions in the city have been switched around and there's now city money available for a new Housing Support Mobile Care Team, which will travel to the Poverello Center and other winter homeless shelters to help get people in the coordinated entry system, she said.

Emily Harris-Shears, the city's affordable housing trust fund administrator, said there will be about \$3.4 million available in fiscal year 2022. The money is for the creation, preservation or acquisition of affordable housing. She noted that last year, 1,301 people experiencing homelessness were connected to resources and housing, and 34 families were actually transitioned from homelessness to housing.

Jordan Lyons, the county's housing specialist, said he and his team are in the midst of developing an affordable housing policy similar to the city's policy, called "A Place to Call Home."

Jesse Jaeger, the director of development and advocacy at the Poverello Center, said it's crucial for the nonprofit to cooperate with the city and the county to help shelter the most vulnerable people in the community.

"Our job is to help people deal with the crisis of homelessness and literally help them stay alive," he said. "We really rely on our government partners."

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