

Counting the Homeless: a Daunting Task

By Lance Cheslock

Every year, cities and regions throughout U. S. are required to conduct a “point-in-time” count that surveys people who are “homeless”. This number is reported to the State and to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and becomes an indicator of the need in that particular community. This is always a daunting task for La Puente.

In rural areas, such as the San Luis Valley, the enormity of the task cannot be overstated. The Valley’s 6 counties have more square mileage than the state of Massachusetts, and this count is supposed to be done during a short interval of time, using volunteers. In effect, we were only able to touch upon a few of the communities that we serve. This year we wanted to explore and reach out to those who live in makeshift housing throughout the isolated flats of the Valley.

What we found was rather disturbing. After documenting those who were at the Shelter, those that we knew were unsheltered in the dark reaches of Alamosa, and a large building in one of our agricultural communities (name withheld intentionally) with over 100 people living in it (bathrooms, but no cooking facilities), we found over 250 occupied dwellings that were not fit for human habitation. (no running water, no electricity or no heat.) Nearly all of these dwellings were miles from any main road, hidden within the desolate landscape. The dwellings were provisional in nature and included old camping trailers, out of service buses, storage sheds, and dwellings cobbled together with a myriad of materials, usually scraps that were being re-purposed in the attempt to create a survivable structure.

These “invisible” communities are void of any safety net. Law enforcement rarely ventures down such roads, there are no public utilities within miles of most dwellings, no cell phone service or postal service, and a winter or spring storm can make the roads impassable for days. Those who experience a medical emergency or simply a flat tire, are at the mercy of the elements, as they must walk long distances to seek out assistance.

We came across a man and his mother living remotely in an old mobile home. They had a flat tire on their vehicle. The son was concerned about their waning food supply and his mother’s diabetes medication. Their plan was to wait until the first of the month to hitchhike into town and get their February allotment of food stamps. He was then going to sell the food stamps to get his tire fixed and secure his mother’s medication.

It was a heartache to discover that many dwellings were the homes of veterans, most of whom had been disabled from their stint in one of the wars. Wary of visitors, their self-isolating nature was usually a result of Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD). Given the lack of the presence of

law enforcement, and a history of theft and vandalism throughout the flats, many of the vets and dwellers carried firearms or had dogs to ensure the safety and security of their property and possessions.

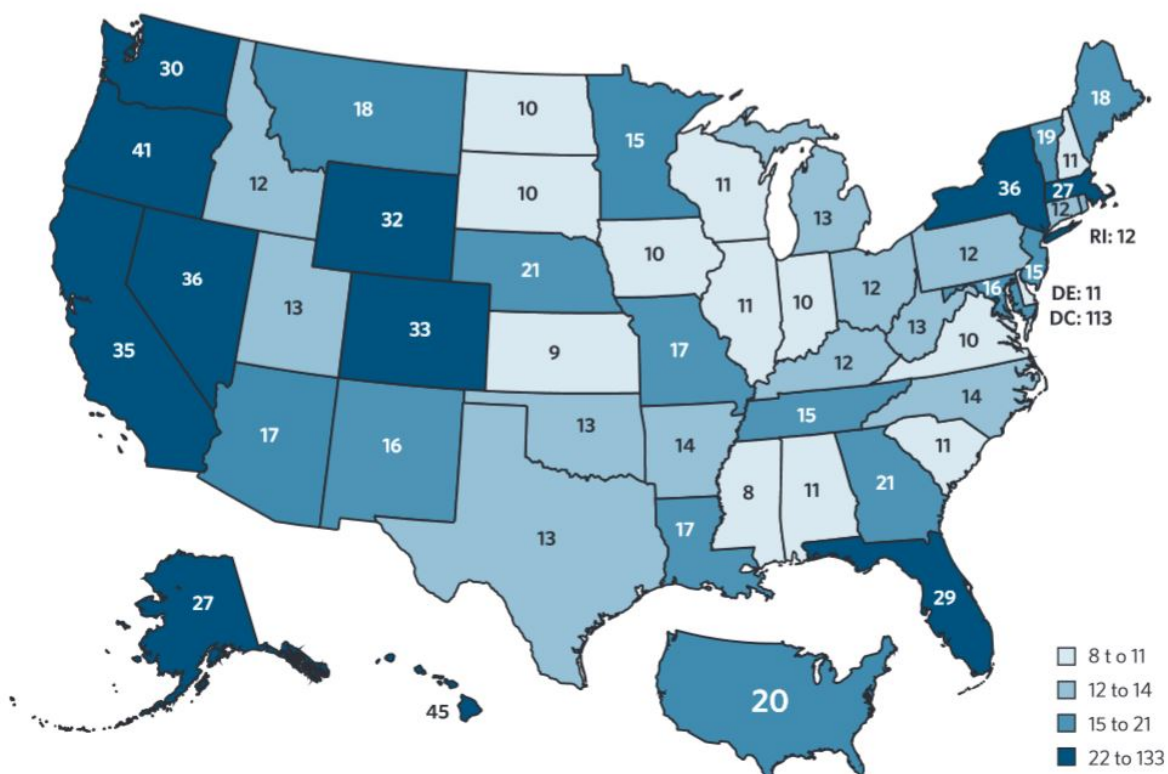
The dwellings were also the homes of many elderly, families, immigrants, urban refugees and “homesteaders.” A common thread throughout the flats was the urgency to give attention to addressing basic health and safety needs. This will take years to deal with.

In just a few days, we counted and surveyed over 950 homeless individuals for this Valley point-in-time count. In the end, our statistical “rate” of homelessness calculates to 206 people per 10,000. This “206” score is *more than 10 times the national average*, more than double any given state’s rate as measured by the National Alliance to End Homelessness in 2012.

The San Luis Valley, and many other poor, rural communities continue to experience wide spread, disproportionate need, yet have severely limited resources. Communities like ours seem invisible to policy makers and the distant resources who congregate in urban America.

We are so grateful for those who understand what we are up against and those that support us in making our work possible. Yes, there is a lot of work to do!

MAP 1.1 RATES OF HOMELESSNESS BY STATE, 2012



OVERALL HOMELESSNESS BY STATE

Similar to the national level, the primary measure of homelessness at the state level is the overall estimate of the homeless population collected during the point-in-time counts conducted by the local CoCs. Map 1.1 illustrates the national variation in the rate of homelessness per 10,000 people. Nationally, the rate of homelessness at one point-in-time in January 2012 was 20 people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 people in the population; 14 states had rates of homelessness in excess of the national rate, ranging from 21 in Georgia and Nebraska to 133 in the District of Columbia.

By comparison, the San Luis Valley's rate of homelessness is 206 per 10,000 of our population.

Source: The National Alliance to End Homelessness "The State of Homelessness in America, 2013" report.

A view from Iraqi Flats looking in all four cardinal directions. This area is located South of Highway 160, near the turn off to the Great Sand Dunes National Park.



This is the farthest point the Post Office delivers mail in this area.

This could still be miles from where people live. Most people don't have physical addresses, rather saying what corner of the road they live on.





The gentleman that lives here cooks his food on a fire outside in a BBQ using wood on top of stones. Once he is done cooking and the fire has gone down, he brings the hot stones into his camper for heat. His only transportation into town is a bicycle he converted with a gas motor. He lives 20 miles outside of Alamosa.



The family who lives here moved to the Valley from Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. A father, a veteran, and his son and family live on this property. The son, who is 28, cannot read or write.

The family who lives in the trailers displayed here has received firewood assistance through Outreach before. The wooden ad-on in the top image is where their fire stove is. The water tank, shown in the image below, is there only source of water. For showers, they drive 20 minutes into Blanca to shower at the Community Center. A husband, wife, and their twins live here. The children are school aged.

The bottom image shows the family's outhouse.





The 50 year old man who lives here has been living out here since he was 29 years old. He's cobbled this building together over the years using a wide range of materials. He is in his 50s now. He raised and homeschooled a son in this home who graduated from Adams State University and is now pursuing a Master's Degree at the School of Mines. Over the years he has implemented a variety of sources of electricity from solar to wind.

Families use what they can to insulate their homes, including old tires.



With little infrastructure or support from the County in place, most road signs, where there are any, are hand painted.