



# East Texas Human Needs Network

## Veterans – 2015 Homelessness Report

Point in Time Homeless Survey and Count – January 22, 2015

### Introduction

When trying to determine who is homeless in Smith County, a wide variety of barriers exist. Often, there isn't an easy way to establish who is homeless because definitions of homelessness vary. In addition, strategies for obtaining information are complex, diverse, and variable. Many experiencing homelessness do not wish to be found or represented as "homeless." Therefore, organizations face unique challenges when working to curb the numbers of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Smith County and around the state, not to mention the many difficulties encountered when providing needed services and care.

Recognizing homelessness as an often temporary circumstance rather than a permanent condition is essential in gathering information about the population experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, regardless of which definition is being used, simply finding those who fit the definition of homeless to participate in a survey, or in another way to be counted, is challenging. Our research is conducted at locations known to be frequented by people experiencing homelessness. Institutional locations include places such as shelters, soup kitchens, day centers, and service centers. Non-institutional locations include streets, parks, or abandoned buildings; these locations can become particularly dangerous in Texas, with days of staggering heat in the summer and freezing temperatures in winter. More difficult to identify are those staying temporarily with family or friends, those staying in hotels or living in cars, and those congregating in places not known to or accessible to researchers. Many remain transient at all times. For these reasons, data on homelessness are usually considered to be underestimates.

As the only homeless-advocacy organization in Smith County, the East Texas Human Needs Network (ETHNN), which includes members of the former Smith County Coalition for the Homeless, has made several efforts to assess the size, characteristics, and needs of the homeless population in order to inform policy makers and service providers. Over the past ten years, Texas Homeless Network (THN) and ETHNN have addressed this issue, refining methodology and adding to what is known about the problem of homelessness in Texas.

ETHNN is a member of the Texas Homeless Network Balance of State Continuum of Care (Tx BoS CoC). To learn more about Tx BoS CoC, please visit [www.thn.org](http://www.thn.org) for more on ETHNN, please visit [www.ethnn.org](http://www.ethnn.org).

### Homeless:

A person sleeping in a place not meant for habitation OR living in a homeless shelter.  
Most move in and out of homelessness.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to ending homelessness among veterans by 2015, but there is *a subset of the homeless veteran population that is slipping through the cracks: **the most vulnerable homeless veterans.***
- These men and women face complex issues that have kept them trapped in the cycle of homelessness and in a “**revolving door**” of **crisis service systems for decades.**
- If we cannot create the right kinds of housing and services models for the most vulnerable now, we risk allowing the newer generation of veterans returning from current conflicts to become tomorrow’s vulnerable long-term homeless veterans.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs stated last year that the number of homeless veterans nationwide had dropped by over 55,000. This is partially due to new funds being initiated into communities around the nation. Unfortunately we don’t see that trend in Tyler/Smith County, **at this point, 27% of our surveyed population are classified as veterans**, a 4% decrease since last year, this accounts for 46 households with 49 individuals.

#### Facts about the Smith County homeless veteran subpopulation:

- Make up 27% of the Smith County homeless population – 46 individuals
- Years of service ranged from 2 to 22 years. Median 3 years
- Ages ranged from 22 to 75 years old – Median age was 54
- 35% Black 59% White
- 93% Male 7% Female
- 91% single, 7% couples without children
- 2% have children

#### Living on the Street

- 18% are living on the streets
- 0% in permanent supportive housing
- 78% in emergency shelter
- 4% in substandard housing

#### Newly Homeless

- 27% are homeless for the first time

#### Chronically Homeless

- 39% are chronically homeless



#### Reasons they became homeless

- 64% became homeless because of inability to pay rent or mortgage
- 57% became homeless because of unemployment
- 52% became homeless because of physical and/or mental illness

#### Education

- 16% have Bachelor or Master degree

## Employment

- 10% are employed fulltime
- 68% are able to work
- 81% are unemployed

## Health

- Medical care - 42 needed and 37 received it
  - 22% have a chronic physical illness
- Dental care - 42 needed and 2 received it
- Mental care - 34 needed and 30 received it
  - 32% suffer from serious mental illness
  - 14% suffer from PTSD
- Substance abuse care – 25 needed, 24 received it
  - 18% suffer from addiction

## Benefits

- 33% do not receive VA benefits

## Housing Services dedicated to Veterans

- HUD VASH – permanent supportive for chronically homeless
- Salvation Army – prevention and rapid re-housing
- Andrews Center – 90 day shelter

## Recommendations

### National, State, and Local Plan

The East Texas Human Needs Network plan follows the models established by the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness and the Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless Annual Report and Pathways Home Addendum.

The plan presents strategies building upon the lesson that mainstream housing, health, education, and human service programs must be fully engaged and coordinated to prevent and end homelessness. Specifically our community will:

### Enhance leadership, collaboration, and civic engagement

With a focus on providing and promoting collaborative leadership across all sectors

- Implement Coordinated Access and Assessment.
- East Texas Human Needs Network will continue working with all housing and mainstream service providers strengthening capacity and knowledge about

collaboration by engaging the community, researching the needs, and collaboratively planning interventions to prevent and end homelessness.

### Retool the homeless response system.

By transforming homeless services to crisis response systems that prevent homelessness and rapidly return people who experience homelessness to stable housing.

- The HEARTH Act and federal regulations require communities to develop a mechanism for common assessment and coordinated access. Currently our community allocates housing resources on a first come-first served basis. Individuals and families take their place at the bottom of endless waiting lists, regardless of their chronicity, medical vulnerability, acuity, or ability to address their own housing stability. The result is often akin to an emergency room devoting its costliest resources to a common cold patient while leaving a late-arriving heart attack victim to fend for him or herself. Effective immediately, our community will the Vulnerability Index (VI) & Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) allows us to assess clients' various health and social needs quickly and then match them to the most appropriate – rather than the most intensive – housing interventions available.
- Implement a Homelessness Management Information System HMIS. A Homeless Management Information System is a local information technology system used to collect client-level data on the provision of housing and services to homeless individuals and families and persons at risk of homelessness.

### Increase access to stable and affordable housing

By providing affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

- ETHNN will work across sectors to develop additional affordable housing and to engage those providers with the capacity to provide permanent supportive housing.

### Implement a Housing First program.

Housing First is a simple philosophy that dictates that the most vulnerable and chronic people experiencing homelessness be offered the choice to move into permanent housing combined with available supportive services ("permanent supportive housing") right away. It discourages imposing conditions on permanent housing, whether related to health, employment or sobriety. This approach has a documented track record of ending people's homelessness while often encouraging them to make their own choices to get healthy, quit drugs and alcohol, and find employment when possible.

### Resources:

United States Interagency Council on Homelessness

<http://www.usich.gov/>

National Alliance to End Homelessness

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/>

Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless	<a href="http://www.tdhca.state.tx.us/tich/">http://www.tdhca.state.tx.us/tich/</a>
Texas Homeless Network	<a href="http://www.thn.org/">http://www.thn.org/</a>
Corporation for Supportive Housing	<a href="http://www.csh.org/">http://www.csh.org/</a>
National Low Income Housing Coalition	<a href="http://nlihc.org/">http://nlihc.org/</a>
Texas Homeless Education Office	<a href="http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/">http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/</a>
National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty	<a href="http://www.nlchp.org/">http://www.nlchp.org/</a>
Center for Public Policy Priorities	<a href="http://forabettertexas.org/">http://forabettertexas.org/</a>

### **Find the full report**

The 2015 Smith County Housing and Homelessness Report may be found at [www.ethnn.org/housing](http://www.ethnn.org/housing)