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Report on Hawaii's Homeless Doesn't Tell Whole Story

By Nick Castele | 11/23/2011

The Hawaii government is hoping that the number of number of homeless people who need shelter and outreach services from providers in the state has peaked.

But service providers say they haven't seen much of a drop, if any, in the number of people coming to them.

Hawaii homeless coordinator Marc Alexander told Civil Beat that the need for services may have plateaued. That was when the University of Hawaii and the Department of Human Services released its annual report on homeless services — this time touting a 6 percent decrease in people seeking services in Oahu from fiscal year 2010 to 2011.



Chad Blair/Civil Beat

"My line is that with these figures we are cautiously optimistic that perhaps we have hit a plateau," Alexander said when the report was released.

But some homeless service providers on the island said more recently they hadn't seen declines in people seeking help. In fact, some providers told Civil Beat they remain near full capacity — and have even experienced increases in people seeking services.

In a phone call with Civil Beat a couple of days after the report's release, Alexander offered some caveats about the findings.

For one, he said, the report itself warns that people seeking services from some "community- and faith-based" service providers aren't counted.

Alexander added that his office needs to study the results further and talk with service providers before saying what the numbers mean.

"I'd like to manage expectations," he said. "And you don't take one data point and all of a sudden prognosticate."

Civil Beat spoke to service providers around Oahu to see how numbers of homeless seeking help have changed. It's clear that the report's numbers don't tell the whole story.

Providers Say Shelters Are Still Full

Some service providers said they've been near maximum capacity both this year and last year.

The number of people staying in Institute of Human Services shelters has increased 12.7 percent over the past year, executive director Connie Mitchell said.

"We have seen more people come in," she said. "We have right now more families than we've had in a long time."

IHS has about 390 beds for men, women and children at sites in Honolulu. Mitchell said that they house about 300 people each night.

Mitchell said the number of homeless coming to IHS for meals was up, too.

Hawaii Helping the Hungry Have Hope — also known as H5 — also saw little or no decrease in homeless seeking shelter over the past two years, administrative manager Samiana Langi said.

She said H5's two shelters, which together house 225 people, are "always at capacity" by the end of the day.

But Langi said she agrees there could be a plateau in homeless looking for services.

"We've taken in most everybody from the street, except for the ones who are not ready to come in," she said.

90-day Plan, APEC Sweeps Not Fully Represented

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About the Author

Nick Castele
Intern



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To be sure, not represented in the study are weeks of Gov. Neil Abercrombie's 90-day initiative to fight homelessness or the APEC-related sweeps of homeless camps in October and November.

The governor's initiative began in May and ended in August. The report, on the other hand, only accounted for homeless seeking services up to June 30, the end of fiscal year 2011.

That means the results of more than a month of Abercrombie's initiative is unaccounted for in the latest report.

Nor does the report count any homeless who sought services when the city and state cleared out Nimitz Highway and parks in the leadup to APEC.

So Why the Decrease?

In a phone call with Civil Beat last Friday, Alexander offered a few possible explanations for the reported drop in people seeking services.

First, he said, federal spending allocated by the HEARTH Act allowed local service providers to get homeless into housing more quickly than before. The law went into effect in April 2010.

Second, there's better data. Alexander said that service providers have done a better job reporting more accurate numbers to the state.

Third, stimulus money is helping service providers stop people from becoming homeless.

Mitchell said IHS has used the federal stimulus program to prevent 200 people from being evicted in the past year.

"They were on the verge of eviction, but we have been able to help them," she said. "They never came into the shelter."

Christy MacPherson, the program manager at Family Promise of Hawaii, said some homeless also may not be counted in the report because they rely on family, rather than shelters, for help.

"There's been no decrease in homelessness," she said. "A lot of them are hidden. They're staying with relatives, and there's four families in one house."

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