

COUNTING HOMELESS YOUTH

The National Alliance to End Homelessness, along with communities across the country, is strongly committed to improving knowledge on the size and nature of youth homelessness – knowledge that is necessary to solve the problem. A critical first step is to ensure that homeless youth are included in all homeless counts. Accordingly, **the Alliance encourages communities to fully include homeless youth in local Point in Time (PIT) counts that will be conducted in January 2011.**¹ Too often, PIT counts fail to account for unaccompanied youth age 24 or under who are homeless. As a result, the extent of homelessness within communities is inaccurately portrayed and local plans to end homelessness neglect the needs of unaccompanied youth.

Local communities can act now to ensure that unaccompanied youth age 24 and under are included in the 2011 PIT count.

RECOMMENDED STEPS²

STEP 1  **Ensure that the community's plan to conduct a PIT count incorporates strategies to identify and survey youth age 24 and under who are experiencing homelessness.**

- Recruit organizations serving homeless youth (runaway and homeless youth programs, youth shelters, transitional housing programs, drop-in centers, and youth housing providers) to participate in local planning meetings for the community's 2011 PIT count.
- Recruit homeless youth to participate in local planning meetings to inform strategy, including helping to identify where homeless youth may be located on the day of the study, best time frames to survey youth at various locations, and recruitment strategies.
- Identify a lead person or organization to develop and coordinate a “youth-focused” strategy and to act as a liaison to youth-serving organizations not regularly attending PIT planning meetings.

¹ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that communities receiving federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grant Program funds to conduct a PIT Count in January 2011.

² The following recommendations are informed by the experience of communities that have improved their coverage of homeless youth in point in time counts, including Baltimore, Minnesota, and elsewhere. Thanks to Richard Hooks Wayman, formerly of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, for the content of this paper.

- Inform all relevant stakeholders (adult- and youth-serving organizations) of the date for the PIT count and expectations for their cooperation and assistance to ensure youth are included.
- Develop materials to educate youth about the intended PIT count, how data from the count are used, and the importance of homeless youth participating. Seek their assistance as volunteers as well as respondents. Stakeholders may be used to help educate the youth they serve; nontraditional venues such as public service notices on popular youth radio stations can also be used.
- Assess whether the existing or planned data collection instrument gathers the information needed to assess the extent and needs of homeless youth and seek modifications as appropriate.

STEP 2 **Map out locations and sources of data collection.**

- Identify all stakeholders that may encounter or serve unaccompanied, homeless youth age 24 or under in one day. This should include youth who sleep in shelters, public spaces, abandoned buildings, as well as “doubled up” youth who are couch surfing that may be identified through contacts at schools, recreation centers, and health clinics. Stakeholders may include:
 - Youth shelters;
 - Youth drop-in centers;
 - Street outreach teams;
 - Youth-focused and adult-focused transitional housing;
 - Faith-based organizations;
 - Local churches that serve hot meals;
 - Health clinics;
 - Emergency rooms of local hospitals;
 - Middle schools, high schools, and alternative education programs;
 - Police departments and law enforcement;
 - Youth employment programs;
 - Food banks;
 - LGBT social service programs; and
 - Recreation centers.
- Identify locations where homeless youth who are not regularly receiving services may congregate, using input from youth and youth providers. Locations may include:
 - Abandoned buildings;
 - High traffic urban areas (which may include areas near nightclubs, tattoo parlors, record stores, strip clubs, or pornography stores);
 - Parks;
 - Malls;
 - Libraries; and
 - LGBTQ-friendly gathering spots (including school support groups, bookstores, coffeehouses) identified by LGBTQ social service providers and youth.

- Encourage the active involvement of homeless education liaisons and/or other individuals in the public school system who are knowledgeable about homeless youth.
 - Schools are required to collect data about homelessness among their students. Schools are therefore able to identify potential respondents and to assist with data collection.
 - Assess whether there are ways that the data schools collect on homeless students (which is unlikely to be consistent with the PIT count because of differing time frames, definitions, etc.) can be used to *augment* the picture of youth homelessness in the community.

- Encourage the support and involvement of the local police to improve data collection.
 - Inform the police that their cooperation is important to the success of the survey.
 - The police department can share locations in the community where they know youth congregate of which youth providers may be unaware.
 - Police can volunteer to participate in the PIT count and be encouraged not to “clear” youth from public locations where homeless youth congregate on the day of the PIT survey.
 - The police may also provide data regarding the number of runaways reported on the day of the survey or identify youth who have unresolved open cases as runaways. These numbers can also augment the PIT count.

- Encourage public agencies that may serve or temporarily detain homeless youth to participate in the PIT count, specifically agencies that operate:
 - Child protection emergency shelters;
 - Truancy centers;
 - Juvenile justice detention centers;
 - Juvenile court; and
 - Children’s mental health intake or treatment centers.

STEP 3 **Facilitate collection of data.**

- Identify local partners, including local youth-serving organizations, college faculty and students, and homeless assistance providers who can volunteer on the day of the count or with count preparations.

- Identify and assign knowledgeable volunteers to act as “lead communication liaisons” in collecting data from one or more key youth stakeholders. Lead communication liaisons are responsible for:
 - Reaching out to the identified youth-serving agencies to inform them of the PIT count;
 - Recruiting others into making a commitment to participate in the PIT count;
 - Identifying a contact person within each agency who will be responsible for organizing internal efforts and ensuring an accurate PIT count;
 - Encouraging the agency’s or entity’s agreement to actively recruit and involve youth participants on the day of the survey;

- Delivering the survey to the agency’s or entity’s contact person the day of the survey;
 - Answering questions or troubleshooting the day of the survey; and
 - Collecting survey instruments following the day of the survey.
- Identify and assign knowledgeable practitioners to act as leads that will be primarily responsible for directing data collection in identified target locations where youth congregate that are not traditional service providers. The lead may:
 - Partner volunteers to collect data in non-traditional venues (e.g. abandoned buildings, parks) to promote safety;
 - Be easily accessible or on-site for volunteers who are collecting data in order to resolve emergency/crisis issues reported by youth that volunteers are unable to address;
 - Answer questions and troubleshoot on the day of the survey; and
 - Collect survey instruments at the conclusion of the PIT count.
- Ensure a knowledge practitioner is accessible to all volunteers on the day/night of the survey to address reporting and legal issues that arise when a youth in danger under age 18 is identified.
- Ensure volunteers are able to collect data from homeless youth identified throughout the day and evening. Locations should be surveyed at multiple times throughout the day to maximize participation and get a more accurate PIT count.

STEP 4 Promote the quality of data gathered.

- Host a training on PIT survey protocols to promote volunteers’ ability to:
 - Engage youth appropriately and encourage their participation in the study;
 - Record accurate responses to questions by ensuring consistent definitions of various living situations (in shelter, outdoors, doubled-up, couch-surfing) are used and applied across all data collectors;
 - Ensure that data collectors check out respondents’ use of local slang language instead of assuming the answer (e.g., “does ‘abandonium’ mean that you are staying in an abandoned building?”); and
 - Discern when to use the assigned lead to resolve issues outside the scope of data collection including addressing mandated reporter issues of identified youth in danger under the age of 18.

STEP 5 Analyze data on youth homelessness.

- Reach out to universities, colleges, local businesses or public school teachers to identify skilled researchers and writers who might volunteer to assist with data analysis and report findings from the survey.

STEP 6  Use PIT findings to educate policymakers and the public about youth homelessness in your community.

- Form a partnership between the research community and the nonprofit community and jointly publish a report on youth homelessness. Share the report widely with public officials, community planners, foundations, nonprofit organizations, media, and interested community stakeholders.