

FEDERAL REPORT

Colorado has a high number of homeless families with kids

By Elizabeth Hernandez
The Denver Post



Daniel Rojas, 5, right, checks on his 2-month-old brother, Jesus, as his other brother, Omar, 1, eats dinner at the Samaritan House on Monday in Denver.

Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post

29TH ANNUAL HOMELESS PERSONS' MEMORIAL VIGIL

A vigil to commemorate the homeless people who have lost their lives in 2018 is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Friday on the front steps of Denver's City and County Building. The public is invited.

So many Colorado families with children are experiencing homelessness that the Samaritan House shelter in downtown Denver is adding

rooms to its family ward to respond to demand.

Colorado is the third-highest state in the nation when counting 3,250 homeless families with children, according to a report issued Monday by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on the state of homelessness in the United States. The count was conducted on a single night in January to capture a snapshot of homelessness.

Additionally, 32 percent of those 3,250 families with children experiencing homelessness in the state were not in a shelter — “considerably higher” than the national rate of just under 10 percent, the report said.

The annual report based on data from about 3,000 cities and counties across the country is intended to provide a better understanding of the scope of homelessness and help measure progress toward diminishing it, according to a HUD news release. Among Colorado's findings: homelessness has slightly decreased since the previous year, rural areas are experiencing nationally-significant levels of homelessness, and there are more families with children trying to survive without a home than in other places in the United States.

In total, the annual homeless count found 10,857 Coloradans experiencing homelessness, the report said.

The Samaritan House shelter has 21 rooms to house families in its extended stay program and is adding four more in a \$1.5 million renovation hoped to be completed by late summer, said Mike Sinnett, vice president of shelters at Catholic Charities. The Samaritan House is one of the shelters under the Catholic Charities umbrella.

“We are usually full,” Sin-nett said. “Families experiencing homelessness are probably one of the largest under-served populations in the area.”

The rooms can accommodate as many as 10 children, with some rooms featuring hotel-like doors connecting rooms between parents and children. The ward is separate from the main shelter so families have their own living quarters, laundry area and television room.

Cathy Alderman, vice president of communications and public policy for Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, explained some of the struggles homeless families face.

“They often go under-counted because they tend to be living in their cars or in motels, and I think we’re seeing in the Denver metro area, with property values increasing, some motels are no longer affordable or available,” Alderman said. “We’re seeing them seek shelters instead, but there’s not very much family shelter space available.”

Parents also can be reluctant to go to shelters with their children for fear of being separated from their little ones or of negative impacts toward their custody arrangements or kids’ schooling, Alderman said.

The Samaritan House’s family program first requires parents to enroll their children in school, then assists in finding employment or a source of income such as disability if unemployable. The program works with its residents to help them save a percentage of money for payment toward permanent housing.

The report found that homelessness in Colorado decreased by .8 percent in 2018. Homelessness experienced by families with children fell by .3 percent statewide since 2017, the report said. Nationally, the annual count found 552,830 people experiencing homelessness. Most stayed in shelters, the HUD report said.

Alderman challenges the Colorado numbers, noting that the surveys are voluntary and leave out folks living in motels or their vehicles.

“We are experiencing an increase in homelessness across the state,” Alderman said.

Nineteen in every 10,000 people were experiencing homelessness in Colorado, according to the federal report. Colorado’s rural homeless community stood out as being among the largest of such populations in the country, according to the report. Colorado came in fifth in the country for having the largest number of rural homeless people — 1,443 — experiencing family homelessness, according to the report.

The same organizations also found Colorado had notably high numbers of unaccompanied homeless youth in rural areas and noteworthy numbers of rural veterans experiencing homelessness. The report listed 246 young people and 315 veterans in rural Colorado are experiencing homelessness this year, putting the state in the top-five for both categories in the country.

Alderman explained that traditional sheltering options aren’t often available in rural areas.

“It may not make sense to have a big 200-bed shelter space if you only have 40 or 50 people who may need it,” Alderman said. “Those rural areas really just haven’t found the right solution for providing

emergency shelter options in addition to transitional housing. As the numbers increase, we're really starting to have those conversations in areas you wouldn't think we'd normally be having them."

Some of those places, Alderman said, include Durango, Grand Junction, Nederland and rural areas surrounding Fort Collins.

"Maybe during the warmer months, people were camping in park areas in some of these locations, but now they really are needing to come inside when it gets so cold," Alderman said. "We get calls like this from across the state."

While Alderman disputes the modest decrease in homelessness the report found, she admits solid progress has been made in finding veterans more permanent shelter.

"The reason for this is the VA has invested tremendous resources in making sure veterans are more frequently connected to long-term housing solutions," Alderman said. "If we could make that investment at the federal level and state level and locally, we'd be making a lot more progress than we are."

For example, the Colorado Department of Human Services along with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless on Tuesday morning are kicking off construction of permanent, supportive housing for veterans experiencing homelessness. The project is located at 1919 Quentin St. in Aurora.