



The Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 30, 2009

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Homelessness No Longer Primarily an Urban Crisis: *One Night Count Finds a Dramatic Increase in Number of Suburban Homeless*

On Friday, January 30, 869 volunteers counted 2,826 people living on the streets of King County. This number is slightly higher than the total number of people counted in the same areas last year, although not statistically significant. The homeless were of every age, race and gender. Some were huddled in doorways, some were sleeping in cars, camped in parking lots, or sheltered in makeshift lean-tos in a city park. What they had in common is that they were all struggling to survive in the dead of winter, and they were all counted, by volunteers organized into 125 teams by the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness.

While the numbers of people sleeping outside in Seattle were the same as the 2008 tally, the numbers increased dramatically in smaller cities outside of Seattle. Particularly striking were the numbers of homeless in south King County. In Kent, for example, the number increased to 193, compared with a total of 65 counted in the same areas in 2008. In Federal Way, volunteers counted 116, compared to 90 last year. In total, south King County showed a 68% increase in the numbers of homeless people when compared to the totals in the same areas in 2008. Jason Johnson, of City of Kent Human Services, said: "It is a big jump. I think we all knew that this year would be higher, but this is a lot higher than anyone would have ever expected." Kent Mayor Suzette Cooke joined 74 volunteer counters in Kent.

Organizers cited several factors as possible causes of the increased suburban numbers. Many Seattle volunteer teams found evidence of recent "sweeps" in Seattle which may have forced homeless people out of the city and into outlying areas. King County is in the 4th year of a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. When other parts of the country are seeing sharp increases, the essentially flat overall numbers may be an indication that the Ten Year Plan is working.

The hundreds of volunteers who participated in the Count were organized through ten area headquarters. Counters returned to historical and new count areas in Bellevue, Redmond, Kirkland, Woodinville, Shoreline, Kenmore, Bothell, Seattle, White Center, Federal Way, Kent, Renton and Auburn. The 2009 One Night Count also collected information from select hospitals about emergency room usage, and from Metro night owl buses operating throughout the county.

Jeff Raikes, CEO of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was a volunteer on the Count for the third year in a row. "It's really powerful seeing the encampments, it's a stark reminder of the difficulties that these people are facing...One reason I do the Count is because it makes me think. I can read the numbers of homeless people like anyone else, but tonight I was reminded that these are real people who come from somewhere and need help. I get a new perspective. I ask myself 'how can I help?'"

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The 2,826 number released this morning does not include the estimated 6,000 people taking advantage of shelter and transitional housing. Nor does this number include people who are surviving without even basic shelter in other parts of the county. The Count currently takes place in only the most densely populated parts of King County, leaving more outlying and rural areas and smaller suburban cities untallied. People who are doubled up with family or friends are not considered homeless under federal guidelines. The full One Night Count report, including numbers of people in temporary shelter, will be available as soon as the shelter survey is completed.

Alison Eisinger, Director of the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness, which organizes the One Night Count, said “This one night tally is a show of community determination. The hundreds of volunteers, from social workers and firefighters to people who themselves sleep in tents, committed overnight to face the stark realities of homelessness in our own backyards. This tremendous effort raises awareness, but we must continue beyond acknowledgment to action.” The Coalition has organized two free advocacy workshops, called “Beyond the One Night Count” for Saturday, February 21st, in Seattle and Kent. Information is available at www.homelessinfo.org.

Today’s Count reemphasizes our need to invest in ending homelessness. Creating housing is both a requisite for stable communities to weather these difficult economic times and an economic driver through the jobs it brings to local people. Bill Block, Director of the King County Committee to End Homelessness, said “We have proven that we can effectively and efficiently help people leave the streets. The Count must inspire us to redouble our investments and our efforts.”

Governor Gregoire’s recently proposed biennial budget includes cuts to many vital state programs that create and support affordable housing, including the Housing Trust Fund. Advocates have been calling on the Governor to reconsider funding cuts for tools and programs that are more desperately needed than ever before.

Now is not the time to cut funding for programs that have been proven and that will help King County and Washington state families who are the hardest hit by the current recession.

The Seattle King County Coalition on Homelessness (SKCCH) works collaboratively to ensure the safety and survival of people who are homeless and to end the crisis of homelessness in our region.

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