

Big jump in Sonoma County homeless

By [JEREMY HAY](#)
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Thursday, May 19, 2011 at 12:53 p.m.

The Catholic Charities Homeless Service Center, a small house on Morgan Street in Santa Rosa, is a crossroads for the stories behind the numbers in the latest census of homeless people in Sonoma County.

And this year the numbers are greater than ever, 4,539, up from 3,247 in the last census, in 2009, according to the Jan. 28 census.

That would represent a 40 percent increase in homelessness, although organizers believe the jump is closer to 25 to 30 percent, with the remainder reflecting more precise counting.

"It's still significant, it's still alarming," said Jenny Abramson, coordinator for the county's Continuum of Care, which organized the census.

Many of the stories — sketched in 33-question questionnaires filled out by every person counted — point to the long and lingering economic slump as a leading cause of today's homelessness, she said.

They come to life daily at 600 Morgan Street at 1 p.m., when people arrive to register to stay the night at Sam Jones Hall, a west Santa Rosa shelter.

There is Alex Averbeck, 39, a 1988 El Molino High School graduate who lost his job and has been staying at Sam Jones Hall for nearly six months.

"I never had trouble getting a job until the economy took a dump," he said. "This whole thing has been an eye-opener."

Anne D, 52, a nurse who withheld her last name so her family wouldn't find out her situation, lost her job too, then declared bankruptcy, then couldn't sell her Siskiyou County home. Now she too sleeps in one of Sam Jones's 120 beds.

She's just been plowing forward, she said, looking for work. "It was rough but I think I was shellshocked, 'Okay, this is what I've got to do.' But there were times I cried."

And there is Kevin Acuff, of Sonoma, for whom things first went south when he lost his job as a construction manager. In April, he learned he had cancer, and then he had to move out of his house because he and his wife were divorcing.

Then his money ran out and soon, he too, was seeking help at Morgan Street, which placed him at the Nightingale Project, a shelter for people with severe health problems.

"It's incredibly stressful and lonely," said Acuff, who started chemotherapy Wednesday and was walking gingerly. "You have no idea where you're going to go next, especially with the economy."



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Alex Averbeck, at the Catholic Charities Homeless Service Center in Santa Rosa, has been homeless since October 2010. He just landed a job that will start next week.

The biennial homeless census was presented to the Board of Supervisors Tuesday. Mandated by the federal government, it makes the county eligible to compete for up to \$2.5 million in federal Housing and Urban Development funds for transitional housing and other services.

The \$78,000 survey, conducted by Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research, also helps the county determine how to direct its money to the best effect.

This year's report likely takes into greater account than the 2009 census the swelling in homelessness caused by the recession and its long after-effects, homeless advocates and service workers said.

"Overall, the impact of the Great Recession is here," said Abramson.

The growing numbers have long been visible on the front lines of homeless service agencies, said Georgia Berland, executive officer of the Sonoma County Task Force for the Homeless.

"The demand has just been rising with the foreclosures and job losses," she said. "We're getting a lot more people who never really imagined they would ever be homeless."

The census was carried out by teams of volunteers, joined by paid homeless guides. They tallied shelter residents and combed outdoor locations from cars to the crawlspaces beneath bridges. They built on a methodology started in 2009 and meant to produce a more precise count.

For example, Abramson said, this year a station was set up for canvassing teams to survey the Sonoma Valley, where last year 11 homeless people were counted. This year, 183 homeless people were found there.

Also, special efforts were made to locate homeless young people by changing the time of canvassing to afternoons. This year, 701 people aged 24 and under were counted, more than two and a half times the number from last year, when 273 people aged 27 and under were found to be homeless countywide.

"The sheer size of that population is very disturbing," said Mark Krug, Sonoma County Community Development Manager.

He said that finding has sparked conversation between youth service providers and homeless service organizations. "That's already happening — what it means, what's the implication of that data — and that will naturally segue into program design," Krug said.

Averbuck falls into a group that also has risen in number: the 82 percent of homeless people whom the survey found were getting no income from any source, including government assistance.

In 2009 that number of people with no income was 52 percent.

Averbuck lost his job as a hotel cook in October and spent several months sleeping on friends' couches and then in his car before moving into the Redwood Gospel Mission shelter. Since January, he's been at Sam Jones Hall, where he volunteers in the kitchen.

He took career coaching classes and this week found work on the assembly line at a technology company.

The network of homeless services available has proved invaluable, he said.

"I want to get back to where I was, be a productive member of society," Averbuck said. "These people are here to help and if you want it you can get it, provided you don't have any real depression or drug or alcohol problems."

On Wednesday, as he prepared to go to his first work orientation, one of the many pitfalls of homelessness delayed him. His car broke down.

"When you're poor, you can't keep your car maintained," said Nick Baker, the Homeless Service Center's program director.