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LOCAL POINT IN TIME HOMELESS COUNT REPORT PUBLISHED AMIDST HEALTH CRISIS

Opportunity Council, in partnership with Whatcom County Health Department, recently published their annual Point in Time (PIT) Homeless Count Report. The report represents a snapshot of persons experiencing homelessness in Whatcom County based on a survey conducted at the end of January, before the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were felt locally. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development requires that this count occur on one night every year, in every county. In Whatcom County, this effort represents coordination of many volunteers, housing providers, and administrative staff.

At first glance, it appears that the numbers haven't changed much from last year, but Teri Bryant, Director of the Whatcom Homeless Service Center at Opportunity Council, says that this may be misleading. "It's important to remember that these 700 or so individuals are not necessarily the same individuals that were counted last January." In fact, of the 555 households counted in January 2020, only 14% were also counted the year before. Since the 2019 count, more than 2,221 individuals have been re-housed or received assistance from the network of partners that provide services through the Whatcom County Coordinated Entry System. Were it not for this support, many of these individuals would likely have become homeless. "Our community has made deep investments in housing for those who need it. Without these investments,

the situation would be far worse today,” Bryant said. “It is imperative to preserve services in order to maintain and promote household stability.”

Other trends of note include a decrease in unsheltered households potentially linked to an increase in emergency beds over time: this inventory has grown from 348 beds in 2012 to 853 beds in 2020. This represents beds added by Lighthouse Mission Ministries as well as temporary winter shelters, shelters for special populations as well as emergency motel shelter for homeless families with children. At the same time racial inequities continue to negatively affect persons of color as well. “These disparities must be addressed moving forward,” responded Barbara Johnson-Vinna, Housing Specialist at Whatcom County Health Department. Staff training for racial equity in homeless services, and revising policies and processes to be more equitable for all served, are just two examples of how we will increase equity in our homeless response system. Johnson-Vinna also noted that substance use disorders and mental health remain prominent and reminds readers that “these are not conditions that fundamentally lead to homelessness. For some, simply being housed leads to increased stability.” Poverty remains the single biggest driver of homelessness.

Preventing families from becoming homeless is the ideal solution, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Households do not need to wait for the eviction moratorium to end before seeking assistance,” said Teri Bryant. Households behind in rent because of COVID-19 related income disruption can be screened for assistance at Opportunity Council, Salvation Army, and Law Advocates. Because the PIT count was conducted before local impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to predict how this health crisis will affect homelessness in the future. “Let us not forget,” added Teri Bryant, “that homelessness alone is a health crisis: being homeless increases risk of premature death. COVID-19 has great potential to exacerbate the crisis that already existed.” In addition to those who were counted, hundreds more are known to be at risk of losing their homes and becoming homeless in Whatcom County. The PIT count represents a snapshot in time and it is understood that it does not capture those who are cycling in and out of homelessness over the year, nor is it possible to capture everyone who is in need of shelter. Although the reasons people

become homeless may be complex, the answer to homelessness is fundamental: housing. Interested parties can access the Point in Time Homeless Count Report at <https://bit.ly/34bOc6F>.

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