

To: Continuum of Care Committee
From: Point in Time Count Project Management Team
Date: November 17, 2020
Re: Conducting the 2021 Unsheltered Point In Time Count

Recommendation from the PIT Count Project Management Team

In anticipation of HUD's guidance, the PIT Count Project Management Team met on Thursday November 12 to develop and weigh options for conducting the 2021 unsheltered Point in Time Count. Obtaining a count of unsheltered persons is at the center of local and system responses to homelessness, informing activities from planning services and allocating resources to administering programs and outcome measurement. While the Point In Time Count provides population-level demographic and health data, it should be noted that these data can be obtained from other sources. However, the observation component of the Point In Time Count is the *only* way the CoC measures the unsheltered homeless population.

From that meeting, the PIT Count Project Management Team recommends:

- Conducting an unsheltered count of some form in 2021; not opting out of the unsheltered count.
- Postponing the unsheltered count by up to 3 months in order to facilitate planning and mitigate the impact of surge in cases/hospitalizations resulting from winter holiday socialization
- A majority of Project Management Team participants were open to obtaining a count of unsheltered people without a survey. Obviously, this is not a preferred strategy, but would be a necessary accommodation of COVID safety basics such as minimizing interactions between people and decreasing the number of volunteers. The PM Team also recognizes that demographic, subpopulation, and health data may be obtained from other sources.

Based on initial HUD guidance issued on Friday November 13th, 2020, the recommended modifications will require that the CoC submit an exception request.

Status of COVID-19 in Alameda County

At the writing of this memo cases across the San Francisco Bay Area are increasing. On November 16th Alameda County's risk status was escalated to "widespread" and the county was placed in the more restrictive purple tier. State and local public health officials are advising Californians to cancel Thanksgiving plan and stay put for the winter holidays. ASR, the CoC's research consultant, and HUD expect the pandemic and surging case rates will have a chilling effect on volunteer recruitment for a 2021 count. Remember that the 2019 count required 500 volunteers and 200 paid homeless guides to cover the more than 700 square miles of Alameda County. Many of the volunteers are older adults, a high-risk group. Homeless guides are also a high-risk group, whose health may be endangered as they lead visual count teams or administer surveys.

Unfortunately, the third and fourth week in January will be approximately when a surge in cases/hospitalizations can be expected from holiday socializing. Moving the count by 1-3 months may help to mitigate the impact of winter holiday socialization.

Kathie Barkow and Jessica Shimmin suggested the possibility of taking a streamlined approach to the count, recruiting 150 service providers and government staff members counting across the entire county over the course of 2 days. ASR indicated they believe this approach would result in a severe undercount. ASR also indicates that using guides is a key feature of their methodology, which again raises concern about health impacts and comparability between this and past counts.

Summary of HUD Guidance for Conducting the 2021 PIT Count

HUD issued its initial guidance for conducting the 2021 PIT Count verbally at the weekly COVID-19 Office Hours and in writing on Friday November 13th, 2020. The memo recommends:

- Communities must adhere to COVID-19 Safety basics including decreasing face to face interactions with clients, decreasing the number of volunteers who need to work in physical proximity, provide PPE for volunteers, and design volunteer processes that minimize close contact.
- Communities can request an exception to some or all the unsheltered PIT Count Requirements including deferring an unsheltered count or taking a head count but no survey.
- Methodological changes that produce the full dataset do not require an exception.
- *“HUD encourages CoCs to use sampling to conduct their counts.”*
- GPS apps for counting may minimize the need to exchange materials or deploy from a central place.
- For communities that intend to use surveys to count unsheltered persons, HUD recommends shortening the survey to the minimum number of questions needed to document homelessness and de-duplicate data. Eliminate all additional questions from the survey.
- The memo encourages using a longer counting timeframe even for observational counts as a health precaution and a strategy for minimizing the need for volunteers while also mitigating the burden on service providers.
- Social distancing principles need to be followed; PPE provided for all participants including homeless persons if using a survey; communities using volunteers should recommend testing within 7 days of the count, or at minimum screen for symptoms on the day of the count.