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# Recession expected to raise number of homeless

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On a single night in 2007, surveyors found 289 homeless people in shelters and on the streets of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County.

That was a 6 percent increase from the last count in 2005, which found 273 people homeless on a given night.

These numbers reveal just a fraction of the problem, however. According to 2007 Census data, there are 10,000 homeless people in Maryland, and one-fifth of them - 2,000 - are in Anne Arundel County.

None of the estimates accounts for people who have family or friends to stay with, but no permanent home. They also do not count people who are turned away from county shelters.

And a new study says the homeless population nationwide - including in Anne Arundel County - is expected to increase even more due to the recession.

Last month, the National Alliance to End Homelessness released data showing that while the number of people who are homeless is down 10 percent nationwide, there have been marked increases in Maryland and other states, including Kentucky, West Virginia and Tennessee.

According to the alliance's report, statewide the homeless population increased 20 percent during the time studied - from 2005 to 2007. That estimate was based on information reported to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Nationwide, based on estimates made in light of the recession, 1.5 million more Americans are likely to become homeless over the next two years, according to the study.

The reasons people find themselves without a home are varied.

Anne Arundel & Annapolis Community Partnership To End Homelessness is a group made up of representatives from city and county agencies as well as homeless service providers. The group conducted a study recently, surveying 150 providers, homeless and formerly homeless people, and other stakeholders.

The survey found that in the city and county, the top reasons for homelessness are job loss, alcohol or drug abuse, mental illness and inability to afford housing.

Single women and men make up the majority of the area's homeless people, the survey showed, but there are not enough beds for them at local shelters.

Some who deal firsthand with the situation, such as Marilyn Baker, development director at the Light House shelter on West Street in Annapolis, said estimates of the county's homeless population may be low due to under-reporting. Some mothers, for example, do not want to declare that they are homeless because they fear losing their children.

The number turned away by the Light House shelter hasn't increased significantly over the past few years. In 2008, the shelter turned away 500 people; in 2007, it turned away 498; and in 2006, it turned away 466, Baker said.

But those numbers are calculated by fiscal years that begin in July - about the time in 2008 when economic conditions began to worsen.

Harry Cole, Light House's executive director, said job loss and the inability to afford housing are the two biggest things driving this area's increased homelessness. Shelter officials have seen an increase in demand for assistance, Cole said, though he wasn't sure if it was entirely economy-driven.

"Unfortunately, because we have our own capacity issues, many of the people are being referred out or we have to make other accommodations for them," he said.

Last year, the shelter had to turn away 500 people who were qualified to stay, and 159 of them were children, Cole said.

"These were people who qualified for our services; there was just no room at the inn," he said.

The economy will continue to exacerbate the problem, he added.

"The people who are going to feel the biggest pinch are the ones in greatest need," he said.

Because jobs are scarce, skilled people are taking entry-level jobs, leaving fewer openings for less-skilled workers, he said. Legislation and funding are needed to help prevent homelessness in the first place, he said.

"We really have to think outside of the box and work together," Cole said.

For now, the Light House shelter will continue as best it can, although there's not much it can do if there is increased demand.

"We're pretty much maxed-out right now," he said. "We will do as much as we can, for as long as we can."

At the Arundel House of Hope on Crain Highway in Glen Burnie, demand continues to outpace the supply of beds and shelter.

But Phil Bailey, who heads the Winter Relief program and the resource and day center there, said economic problems haven't hit the house yet.

"We have not yet begun to feel the pinch" of the economy, he said. Most of the people who come to this organization have been homeless for some time. People who are newly homeless due to foreclosure and evictions often have a safety net and don't need assistance right away, he said.

The faith-based organization coordinates the Winter Relief program through which churches volunteer to house homeless people for one week at a time. About 40 churches throughout the county volunteer to take in homeless people through the winter months, and the group hopes to recruit enough churches to make it into a yearlong program.

The group normally has two churches volunteer per week, each taking in about 30 people. But they still turn people away, Bailey said.

The first night they were operating in October, only one church participated. They sheltered 36 people, but had to turn 35 others away, he said.

On a particularly frigid Jan. 20, they sheltered 60 people and had to turn away 17. The demand tends to increase with the cold weather, Bailey said.

"We're trying to expand our capacity, recruit additional churches so we can meet the need as it comes," he said.

While it's not as critical to have shelter in summer months, people who are homeless often have difficulty getting jobs and dealing with addictions if they have no place to stay, he said.

"Sleeping out in the woods doesn't help them address any issues. ... It doesn't work," Bailey said.

For more information on the shelters, call Light House at 410-349-5056 or the Arundel House of Hope at 410-863-4888.