**Richmond region records largest single-year spike in homelessness with 50% increase**

The number of people experiencing homelessness in the Richmond area rose more than 50% over the past year, according to preliminary figures from an annual census of the region's homeless population.

The increase - from 549 to 838 people - is the largest single-year spike since the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care began tracking the number in the 1990s. The most recent federally mandated head count, conducted at the end of January, confirmed fears that the COVID-19 pandemic had spurred a sharp rise in homelessness locally.

"Sadly, it's not surprising because we know that homelessness is a sign of economic and housing conditions in the community," said Kelly King Horne, executive director of Homeward, the region's coordinating agency for homeless services.

The figures include people staying in shelters or sleeping outside in the city and the town of Ashland, as well as Charles City, Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, New Kent and Powhatan counties.

When the pandemic gripped the region last March, city officials, nonprofits that aid the homeless, and advocates worried that job losses would lead to unparalleled housing insecurity. More than 4,400 people within three days of losing their homes called the region's homeless crisis line last calendar year, according to data provided by Homeward.

Court closures, state and federal protections for renters and homeowners, increased unemployment benefits, and millions in rental and mortgage relief aimed to help residents stay housed as the public health crisis wore on. Those measures helped avert an even steeper increase, King Horne said.

At the outset of the pandemic, the region's network of homeless service providers scrambled to move those sleeping outside into hotels around the region. That effort expanded last fall to include people with nowhere to sleep on nights with inclement weather or sub-40 degree temperatures in the forecast.

On the night of the census, 98 people who were counted slept outdoors, a decrease from 130 in the previous year. That same night, 450 others slept in hotel rooms made available through the emergency shelter program or on air mattresses in the city's safety net shelter, which is now operating out of a hotel ballroom.

Millions in federal CARES Act money, and some local funds, have covered the cost of the hotel program. It is tentatively slated to run into June, King Horne said. More federal aid for homeless services is expected in the next federal stimulus package, she added.

This is the second consecutive year the region has registered an increase in its homeless population. From January 2019 to January 2020, there was a 10% increase, from 497 to 549 people. At the time, that was the largest increase in a decade.

This year's count is the highest since 2014, when 846 people were without permanent shelter around the region, according to figures provided by Homeward.

The count includes only those sleeping in shelter programs or observed by outreach workers sleeping outside on a single night. It does not tally people who lost housing and subsequently moved in with a relative or friend. Nor does it capture all people sleeping in cars or living in hotels that aren't a part of the region's emergency shelter program.

The increase comes as the region's apartment market has constricted. The metropolitan area's residential vacancy rate has tightened in the past year from 5.1% to 2.7%, meaning finding apartments that people with limited income can afford is difficult, King Horne said.

That trend has made getting people who are experiencing homelessness back into permanent housing harder than ever, King Horne said. And as a result, "people can't move out of homelessness as quickly as they could have, even last year," she said.

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney's administration convened a Homelessness Advisory Council last month to study issues facing the region's homeless service system.

Reggie Gordon, the city's deputy chief administrative officer for human services who is heading up the effort, said the sharp rise shows the need for the region to increase its supply of deeply affordable homes.

"Affordable housing is the panacea to this problem," Gordon said.

The advisory council is scheduled to issue recommendations later this month.

**Even with help, finding new homes is harder than ever for families experiencing homelessness**

**By Mark Robinson**

All that Starr Reynolds wants is a two-bedroom apartment she can afford.

The 43-year-old mother and her two school-age children have been homeless since last November, when a stalker forced her to flee her previous apartment.

Reynolds, her 10-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son slept in her car for two weeks of frigid nights. In mid-December, they moved in to a South Richmond motel that is functioning as an emergency shelter for the region's homeless.

Over the past three-and-a-half months, Reynolds estimates she has contacted 50 to 60 properties but has not been able to secure a place she can afford.

"I'm really, really trying not to panic, because I know we can only stay in a shelter for so long," Reynolds said.

Finding an available, affordable apartment is harder than ever, according to agencies working to help families who have lost their homes. The apartment vacancy rate in the Richmond metropolitan area dropped from 5.1% to 2.7% through last year, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures.

The crunch has forced families experiencing homelessness to spend longer periods doubled up with relatives or in emergency shelters, and has subjected them to more trauma.

The Richmond region registered its largest single-year spike of homelessness in 2021 since the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care began tracking the figure in the 1990s. The population rose from 549 to 838, a 53% surge, according to figures provided by Homeward, the region's coordinating agency for homeless services.

At the same time, the average number of nights a person spends in local emergency shelters has risen, from 33 in 2019 to 44 in 2020 and so far in 2021, Homeward's figures show.

Combined, the influx of people needing help and the dearth of available apartments have strained a system premised on rehousing people as quickly as possible.

A process that used to take 30 to 60 days is now taking two and sometimes three times as long, said Stephen Troublefield, a community housing specialist with HomeAgain, a local nonprofit.

Among the factors that Troublefield and others have pointed to as contributing to the crunch: a sharp decline in the number of evictions.

A federal moratorium and coinciding state protections have drastically reduced the number of evictions carried out across the region during the ongoing pandemic. Consequently, less turnover has meant fewer openings at apartments with lower rents. That has caused a bottleneck for tenants who have no other options in a region with a well-documented shortage of affordable homes, he said.

"It's a sad, sad issue," Troublefield said. "It's a double-edged sword that some people have to lose their housing for other people to gain their housing."

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Virginia has a shortage of more than 157,000 apartments for households deemed extremely low-income by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Those households earn 30% or less of the median income.

For a household of two in Richmond, that's $21,450 or less. For a household of four, it's $26,800 or less.

Local and state officials have taken steps over the last year to begin chipping away at the massive need. The Richmond City Council approved a proposal from Mayor Levar Stoney to dedicate a projected $10 million to the city's Affordable Housing Trust Fund by 2025.

The Virginia General Assembly approved, and Gov. Ralph Northam is expected to sign into law, a new state tax credit program that officials say will accelerate the production of workforce housing by hundreds of units annually in the coming years.

But those measures may only stem a problem that is getting worse, as housing costs outpace income growth.

The Partnership for Housing Affordability estimates the Richmond region alone must grow its affordable housing stock by 1,000 units annually to meet the projected need by 2040.

The long-term fixes do little in the short term for families like Reynolds', who don't make enough money, have an eviction on their rental history and face other barriers to securing housing in the private market.

Nonprofits like HomeAgain and Housing Families First work directly with landlords and property managers to secure units for the households they aid.

In the past, the approach was effective because landlords were willing to loosen their screening requirements for families working to get back on their feet. Since the pandemic, that's changed.

"When I'm speaking with landlords, a lot of times they're saying they're feeling a lot less comfortable taking a risk on a family due to the eviction freeze," said Ashley Stupak, a community housing navigator for Housing Families First. "They're worried that if the family is not able to make rent, then they won't be able to evict them."

Income requirements have grown more stringent, too. More often than not, landlords want tenants to demonstrate income that is two or three times the monthly rent, and aren't willing to lease to tenants who make less, Stupak said.

For single parents working wage jobs in search of a two- or three-bedroom unit, that's virtually impossible, she added.

Reynolds got sick at the beginning of the pandemic and left her job at UPS. She hasn't found a new one since. She said she receives a Social Security disability check of about $1,600 per month, plus unemployment benefits of about $136 a week that she uses on food. The latter will soon expire, she added.

Stupak has helped Reynolds through the search, checking in with her daily, routinely sharing prospective leads and negotiating with property managers on her behalf.

Reynolds and her two children are among the 438 people across 129 households who have been assisted by Housing Families First since last July, according to figures it provided.

The nonprofit has increased the number of people it has helped by 24% over the same period last year by working with more households with children, through its new Bringing Families Home partnership with Richmond and Henrico County Public Schools, said Beth Vann-Turnbull, the nonprofit's executive director.

Typically, it costs between $2,000 and $4,000 to move a family experiencing homelessness into a new apartment. That sum covers the security deposit, first and last month's rent, and other move-in expenses. It often includes the cost to settle outstanding judgments or utility balances that can derail an approval.

The nonprofit is helping Reynolds settle judgments from a pair of evictions on her record from several years ago, she said.

Even with the nonprofit's support, Reynolds has heard a refrain from property managers during her search: Try again in a few months. When she started looking in November, she was told to call back in January. That month, they recommended calling again in April.

Last week, she thought she had finally found her future home; a two-bedroom apartment at the Eagle Mill Apartments in Carver was available. Then Stupak called to tell her the monthly rent: $1,200 - $300 above her budget of $900 a month for rent and utilities.

"Now, I'm back at step one; I was looking forward to that [place]," she said.

Living in the hotel has taken a toll on her children. Her daughter, once talkative, seldom seems like herself anymore, Reynolds said. Her son has begun binge eating, and he has gained weight rapidly. Both are struggling with virtual schooling, and the effort it takes to keep them engaged throughout the day has frayed their mother's nerves.

Reynolds has stopped telling them about the apartment search. Getting their hopes up, only to see the disappointment on their faces, got to be too much, she said. But she isn't giving up hope.

Stupak's persistence and support has helped her through the painstaking process, she said. When doubt has crept in, she has leaned on Stupak, her older sister and her faith. The family prays together daily.

"God did not bring us out of the car to put us back in the car," she said. "I don't believe that. When my son was crying, 'we've got to get out of this car,' the next day, we got into the shelter. God has a plan. ... We're going to find something. I know we will."

**As hotel stays end, stability remains elusive for most who passed through pandemic-response program**

**By Mark Robinson**

As Shaquanda Gregory carried the last of her possessions from a South Richmond hotel room earlier this month, she was running late for her infant's doctor's appointment.

The hotel-based emergency shelter program that kept Gregory and her soon-to-be 4-month-old son off the streets this winter has formed the crux of the region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic for people experiencing homelessness. More than 400 people were relying on it in the middle of this month, according to Homeward, the region's coordinating agency for homeless services that is overseeing the program.

Gregory and her baby had been, as well, until Homeward stopped paying for their hotel room about 10 days ago. Her discharge ended a three-month stay that provided a roof over their heads and free meals, but little else in the way of support to regain stability, Gregory said. She and her son, Tyshaun, left the Candlewood Suites the same as they had arrived: homeless.

"I'm a single mom right now trying to do everything by myself," the 28-year-old said after pausing to give Tyshaun a bottle. "My sister said we could come over there for a little while. I don't want to put her in a bind, but she doesn't want to see us out on the street."

Of the more than 1,800 people who have stayed in Homeward's non-congregate shelter program over the last year, 24% have exited to permanent housing, according to data the nonprofit provided; 20% remain in hotels, and 10% have received referrals to programs led by other service providers in the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care. What happened to the other 46% is unknown, and will remain so unless those individuals seek out services again, Homeward said.

Of the 50 people who left the program the same week as Gregory, 36% accepted a referral to another emergency shelter program or could pay for their own hotel stays, according to Homeward. The nonprofit said it does not yet know what happened to the remaining 64%, and will only know if they seek out services again.

"People check out of the hotels every day. Sometimes it's a planned move, sometimes not. It's a moving picture, and that's the nature of homelessness," said Kelly King Horne, Homeward's executive director. "The hotels are not housing. What's masked in some of this, especially this year, is that there are people exiting to stable situations but that are not captured in our data. ... We're working to try and help people become stable again."

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**The pandemic** has spurred the largest single-year spike in homelessness in the Richmond region since the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care began tracking the figure in the 1990s.

Between January 2020 and January 2021, the number of people experiencing homelessness rose from 549 to 838, about a 53% increase, according to figures from a federally mandated census.

Amid the spike, Homeward has come under fire from advocates and some members of the Richmond City Council who say the nonprofit hasn't done enough to aid the region's most vulnerable residents.

A barrage of criticism has raised issues with its management of emergency shelter programs, including poor communication with the clients it is serving and a lack of support for the people in crisis who are relying on them.

"This is an issue we've been hearing about for months in the city of Richmond," said Kristen Larson, the 4th District councilwoman, at a special meeting of the council's Education and Human Services Standing Committee held last week to explore long-term solutions to what is a growing crisis in the region.

"Our folks are not getting the support that they need to find their way through the process," Larson said.

Elsewhere, localities have also turned to hotels to keep people sheltered during the public health crisis.

Virginia Beach used its emergency response to engage households experiencing homelessness with intensive case management, which has led to better outcomes, said Pamela Shine, the homeless services system manager for the Virginia Beach Housing Resource Center.

Of the 425 households Virginia Beach moved into hotels during the pandemic, 75% exited into permanent housing, Shine told the council panel.

"We still have individuals who are there, and we do have a phase-out plan. But what's baked into that plan is making sure these folks are slated for our permanent housing program prior to them exiting their hotel shelter prematurely and going back on to the streets," Shine said.

The rental market in Virginia Beach is not as tight as it is in the Richmond region, King Horne said, citing census data on the percentage of the two metropolitan areas' available housing stock. Virginia Beach's vacancy rate at the end of last year was 8.7%, compared to Richmond's 2.7% rate. That, combined with the dearth of units in the Richmond region reserved for people making 30% of the area median income or less, has made rehousing people experiencing homelessness more challenging than ever, she said.

King Horne said staff met routinely with families in the hotel program to talk about their situation and work on a personalized housing plan.

Gregory said she did have periodic check-ins with a staffer, but that those interactions felt perfunctory, meant to check a box rather than help her answer questions crucial to regaining her stability: What supports are available for a single parent who is transitioning back to full-time work? How can she save for a deposit and move-in costs if she has to pay for child care out of pocket? Is there anywhere she can afford to live on her current income? If not, then what can she do?

Gregory started a new job in February laundering hospital linens. She makes $10 an hour in the part-time position, her only income aside from SNAP benefits, she said. A family friend is helping cover child care costs at the moment, so she can save to get back on her feet.

That will mean finding a place she can afford in a private rental market with scant options, one that Homeward and its partners have said is more difficult to navigate than ever.

To Gregory, her discharge from the program amounted to a broken promise.

"We didn't get the help that we was told we would get, nowhere near the help," Gregory said of the program.

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**Chelsey Webster**, a 26-year-old mother of two who has spent two months in the program, voiced similar frustration.

"I wasn't told a specific time about how long the stay was going to be, but I do know at first I was told it was going to be until we found adequate housing, and then it turned into the stuff that happened last week," said Webster, referencing the notices given to families staying at the Candlewood Suites hotel.

After Homeward transferred her to a different hotel and extended her stay, Webster said she was told last week that she could either move into a traditional shelter program or leave. She chose the latter, fearing that a traditional shelter setting might be challenging for her 1- and 2-year-old sons. She decided to put her stimulus check toward a monthlong hotel stay and hopes to find an apartment in that time frame.

King Horne said households were told upon check-in that their stays were temporary and that each family received at least three days' notice of their ending stays. In some cases, people told staff they had other options available to them, which contributed to the decision to end certain households' time in the program, she said.

Since Gregory's stay ended, she has slept at her twin sister's home. She said she isn't sure how long the temporary arrangement can last because she is not on the lease, and doesn't want to put her sister and her six children at risk of eviction.

After signing up on the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority wait list, she had hopes of moving into public housing. A follow-up call revealed some 5,000 names were ahead of her on the list. A caseworker from Housing Families First, which specializes in rapid rehousing, reached out about a week after she left the hotel. The call boosted her spirits, but with the existing challenges in the rental market, the process of finding an apartment she can afford can take as long as two or three months, if not longer.

The recent round of stimulus checks offered a glimmer of hope. She stashed the money in her savings account, so if she finds an apartment she can afford, she can put down a deposit right away.

Until then, she is hoping the upheaval does not affect her son.

"I'm glad it's happening while he's young and doesn't know what's going on, instead of him being a couple years of age - old enough to know we're homeless."