

STUDY SESSION

City council questions local data on homelessness

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According to data from the Northern Colorado Continuum of Care (NoCO CoC), the number of people who received homelessness services in Loveland jumped from 228 to 419 between January and June, but whether that's due to growth in the population or more robust data collection is unclear. At Tuesday's study session, Loveland City Council heard from NoCO CoC Director Kelli Pryor about the benefits and challenges of using a data driven approach to serve the regional homeless population and provide coordinated care.

The NoCO CoC is part of the federal Continuum of Care program that provides funding to state and local governments and nonprofit organizations to help end homelessness. Pryor explained to council that it is not exactly a standalone organization, but rather a network of service providers in Larimer and Weld counties that work together to find housing solutions for individuals and families. She and her team make sure that strategies are aligned across the region and that partners have access to high quality data to help guide case management.

Key to that effort is the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a database shared statewide among providers to collect demographic information from homeless individuals and families when they receive services. This data is then used to evaluate the effectiveness of local programs and initiatives, among other things, Pryor explained.

"It's so useful for understanding the actual state of what's going on," she said. "We have an ability to pull reports, to know exactly who's experiencing or how many people are experiencing homelessness — what are their demographics, what are their

characteristics...who's moving into housing, who's not moving into housing — really anything you want to know, we could probably figure it out at some point in time.”

Until last year, Pryor continued, the system was not widely used among Loveland providers, but that has changed in the last 12 months, leading to what seems like an influx to the city, but is really a result of the additional reporting.

“And, I think it's fair to say that there have been people experiencing homelessness in the community here, but they haven't necessarily been in a position to seek services and now there are services for them to seek, and those are being tracked,” she added.

NoCO CoC also oversees the annual Point In Time count, a “snapshot” of the local homeless population on a single night in January. This number is useful, Pryor said, because it is collected the same way each year and is useful for showing trends. However, there are also limitations to this count, and people can be missed.

Pryor and her team also manage the Coordinated Assessment Housing Placement System (CAHPS), also known as coordinated entry. This uses HMIS data to produce a “by-name” list that matches enrollees to housing resources according to vulnerability and severity of need. Such resources could include housing vouchers, short-term rental assistance programs or supportive housing with case management.

Following the presentation, Pryor faced some probing questions from City Council about the data, including a persistent request from Councilor Steve Olson to share HMIS data with the Loveland Police Department to assist enforcement.

Pryor explained that she can share aggregate data with LPD, but the governing body for the state CoC prohibits sharing client-level data HMIS with law enforcement.

“The purpose of the homeless services is to help people feel safe to give their information,” Pryor said. “And the collaborative determined that if law enforcement had equal access to those records, that we likely would not get quality data, because people would likely not share.”

Pryor also got some pushback to her contention that the data are unclear about whether homelessness is increasing in Loveland from Councilor Jon Mallo, who said that it seems obvious to many that the numbers are on the rise.

The director stood firm on her assertion, but Alison Hade from the city's Community Partnership Office, acknowledged that Mallo has a point, while defending the data collection theory.

"We know it's increasing, because that is what is happening in a post-Covid world," Hade said. "...so now we have to figure out what does quality data look like over time. So there's a little bit more of a nuance to it than it just increased to double."

Before the discussion ended, Pryor and Hade fielded other questions about available data and how it can be used by the city to fill gaps in services and how NoCO CoC works with other agencies in the area. Olson and Councilor Dana Foley also argued more about sharing the data with LPD.

In September, representatives from Homeward Alliance, a regional agency that is assisting Loveland, will be back before council to provide additional data about the local and regional homeless populations.

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