

Fresno and Madera counties see big drop in homeless population

By George Hostetter



In a January 2014 file photo, a homeless woman tries unsuccessfully to stay dry under a water-soaked, makeshift blanket on G Street in Fresno. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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- Homeless count in Fresno-Madera counties



Populations	2010	2013	2014
Homeless	4,288	3,131	2,592
Chronically homeless	879	793	497
Veterans	n/a	338	272

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Fresno is making real progress in helping the homeless — and more help is on the way, local officials promise.

The number of homeless people in Fresno and Madera counties fell nearly 40% in the past four years, according to a recent census sponsored by the federal government.

The population of chronically homeless dropped 43% in the same period. The population of homeless veterans fell nearly 20% in just the past year.

The census didn't break out numbers just for Fresno, but it's safe to say the biggest city in the region represents by far the area's biggest homeless challenge.

"The city is making great progress, and so is Madera," said Ophelia Basgal, the federal [Housing and Urban Development](#) Department's San Francisco-based regional administrator.

[Fresno Housing Authority](#) Chief Executive Preston Prince said anyone who gets out and about on a regular basis knows the homeless are still among us.

"They are very visible," Prince said. "But when you look at the data, it shows that we've made tremendous strides. We're on the right trajectory."

Kelli Furtado, deputy chief of staff for Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, refused to view the report's numbers as "good." They are "better," she cautioned.

In other words, authorities aren't taking their eyes off the suffering still out there.

The HUD count shows the Fresno-Madera homeless population dropping from 4,288 in 2010 to 2,592 this year. The number of chronically homeless fell from 879 in 2010 to 497 this year.

Homeless vets weren't a separate category in the 2010 count. The number of homeless vets dropped from 338 in 2013 to 272 this year.

Such progress, Furtado said, is due to "a concentrated, focused, all-hands-on-deck" effort by agencies, groups and volunteers all across Fresno and Madera counties.

That effort continues. The latest count "is not as good as it gets," Prince said. "We have high expectations."

Fresno City Manager Bruce Rudd said the city as part of this year's budget is spending \$1 million to provide shelter for the homeless. The Housing Authority will be the city's agent in this work.

Furtado said the city expects soon to get about \$1 million from HUD to fund emergency shelter services.

[Fresno First Steps Home](#), the homeless initiative championed by Swearingin, is still at it. The nonprofit contributed nearly \$1 million to the Housing Authority in the past two years, helping 100 households facing homeless challenges.

The Housing Authority expects to have nearly 300 housing vouchers for homeless vets, a nearly 50% hike from past norms. The agency has housing programs for other segments of the homeless population as well.

Fresno last spring announced it was part of the [25 Cities](#) initiative, an effort led by President Barack Obama's administration. The initiative will, among other things, end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. Fresno was recently chosen to be part of [Zero:2016](#), an effort spearheaded by national nonprofit Community Solutions, to end chronic homelessness by the end of 2016.

Keys to improvement

How did the big drop in Fresno-area homelessness happen?

In the long debate on this contentious issue, no one ever disputed that significant resources could be gathered. But there was always an ill-defined and missing piece. In Fresno at least, the downtown homeless encampments persisted and often expanded. Smaller camps dotted the urban landscape. Courtroom fights and political battles

seemed to dominate the discourse.

HUD's Basgal pointed to two factors of change.

The first, she said, was buy-in from the local Continuum of Care's partners and other allies on the "Housing First" strategy.

The process in the old days often focused on preparing the homeless for the responsibilities that go with housing. When that challenge was cleared, the homeless got help to get off the streets.

That got things backward, the agencies decided. It's far better from economic as well as humanitarian perspectives, they realized, to first get the homeless in safe, secure shelter, then provide services addressing people's troubles.

With a firm game plan and impressive resources in place, the agencies and nonprofits became a team.

"It really makes a difference when people act in a collaborative way," Basgal said.

The second factor is leadership, Basgal said. The Swearingin administration, with its vow to end chronic homelessness with a housing-first strategy, "is a force to be reckoned with," she said.

City Hall has learned another lesson: The perfect must not be enemy of the good.

Critics routinely go to the City Council. Some say the city should sponsor campgrounds for the homeless that would be run by homeless. Some say the city doesn't spend enough general fund dollars on the homeless.

City officials listen politely to the campground advocates, then move on. City Hall for a variety of reasons has never shown an interest in the idea.

City Hall leaders say general fund spending is a delicate balance of worthy interests. These include public safety, parks and potholes.

Rudd said City Hall and its regional partners continue the good fight, convinced they've found a way to comfort many of society's most vulnerable.

"The game plan going in was that what we do has to be sustained," Rudd said. "We're not going back to the old ways."

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