Local nonprofits Moab Solutions and the Moab Valley Multicultural Center are getting ready for an annual survey to determine how many people are experiencing homelessness in Grand County, part of a nationwide practice called a Point-in-Time survey.

Every January, agencies across the country try to locate all individuals in their area experiencing homelessness on a specific night—this year, the date is Jan. 27. They ask those individuals some details about their circumstances, and the data is used by the state Department of Workforce Services and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to evaluate methods being used to address homelessness and to determine how funding is allocated.

“It’s really just a way to get a better idea of the need in every community,” said Liz Donkersloot, housing resource coordinator for the MVMC. “The best count that we can possibly get helps not just our local organizations in knowing who’s out there and what kind of support they need, but will also affect how much funding we get.”

Homelessness in Grand County

Sara Melnicoff, founder of Moab Solutions, has been working with people struggling with homelessness in the Moab area since 2008, helping people access the aid they need.

She recalled one homeless man who was featured in a local news story about Moab Solutions.

“I got a call from his family,” Melnicoff said. “They had been looking for him for 15 years. They didn’t know if he was dead or alive.”

The man eventually reunited with his family and moved into an apartment near Nashville, Tennessee.

Both Moab Solutions and the MVMC are part of the Local Homeless Coordinating Committee (LHCC), a group dedicated to addressing homelessness locally and working with state and federal agencies that distribute funding and maintain records on homelessness. The group meets monthly.

For this year’s Grand County Point in Time count, Melnicoff said she doesn’t expect to find many people living outdoors currently.
“The number [of homeless people] fluctuates; some people will get into housing, or they’ll move,” Melnicoff explained. One local man who was chronically homeless died this year, she noted with sadness.

While some chronically homeless people become familiar to service organizations, others who are struggling with housing might not be visible to survey workers. Donkersloot said the LHCC hopes to get a clearer picture of the homeless population with this year’s count.

“We don’t have a great idea of how many people are living in their cars or how many people are in places that aren’t meant for habitation, like a storage facility or a shed or a garage,” she said. Outreach workers are asking for those individuals to participate in the count, reaching out to them through word of mouth, social media, and local radio and print outlets.

“We’re trying to make more of an effort this year to get a better idea of who is out there that might not be participating in services,” Donkersloot said.

Point in Time workers are also checking in with service providers like the Veterans Affairs clinic, the Interact Club, and the Grand County School District to see if they know of individuals who qualify for the count. This year's survey has been shortened to four or five questions, down from about 20 in previous years, to reduce the amount of interaction time required to complete the survey in light of coronavirus risks. Melnicoff noted that she will bring masks to distribute to people who participate in the count.

Melnicoff said she did an informal count of unsheltered homeless people in Moab over the summer and was alarmed to find about 25 individuals.

“I got very concerned,” she said. Melnicoff has advocated for a designated space for homeless people to camp, equipped with portable toilets.

Currently, camping outside of a permitted recreational campground is illegal within Moab City limits. Melnicoff opposed the ordinance, which passed in 2010.

“I went and spoke out against it for the sole reason that you’re criminalizing homelessness and there’s no other alternative for some people,” said Melnicoff.

Grand County recently passed a similar ordinance, stating that the intent was to prevent illegal overnight rentals and nuisances in residential neighborhoods.

According to the 2020 Utah Annual Report on Homelessness, there were 12 homeless individuals identified in Grand County by the Point in Time survey, with three considered “sheltered” and nine “unsheltered.” That is higher than the 2019 tally which identified seven people, but lower than 2018’s count of 19 people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness increased statewide last year, up to 3,131 individuals identified in the 2020 Point in Time count from the 2,798 individuals counted in 2019.

State initiatives
State leaders have been trying to streamline the organizations that provide services for the homeless and update their approach to the problem.

A November 2020 report from the Kem. C Gardner Policy Institute, a research organization associated with the University of Utah, recommended various restructuring moves to the state’s organizations that address homelessness from the highest level down to local groups. In the 2021 general session, a proposed bill is expected to implement these recommendations, including the creation of a “chief homelessness officer.”

In 2019, the state created the Utah Strategic Plan on Homelessness, which aims to make homelessness in Utah “rare, brief, and non-recurring.” The plan was updated in September 2020 and identifies “service gaps” of unmet needs: affordable housing, permanent supportive housing, and emergency beds; mental health services and substance use disorder treatment; case management; prevention, diversion, and outreach services; data collection and reporting; and transportation.

The report emphasized that rural areas in the state are particularly in need of some of those resources and services, especially permanent supportive housing and emergency beds; mental health and substance use treatment; public transportation; and thorough reporting of homeless populations and needs.

The report notes that the Point in Time count was designed to be used along with homeless shelters, which don’t exist in many rural areas—making accurate counts more difficult in the very areas that lack resources to address homelessness. Part of the state strategic plan targets more resources to rural and small urban areas to support homelessness services and robust data collection.

The plan also recommends incentivizing the development of affordable housing, something local leaders in Moab and Grand County have been focused on for years.

Moab Mayor Emily Niehaus has been a strong advocate for affordable housing locally and at the state level. She is the founder of Community Rebuilds, a local nonprofit that provides housing to low-income earners, and currently serves on the Utah Governor’s Rural Partnership Board, where she has underscored affordable housing as a root issue in rural areas.

The Housing Authority of Southeastern Utah has also been addressing affordable housing and manages 10 units set aside specifically for homeless individuals between its Cinema Court and MAPS Senior Living housing developments. According to HASU Director Ben Riley, all of those units are currently occupied. HASU also has 21 fully-subsidized units in its Virginian Apartments property, meaning rent in those units could be as little as zero dollars.

In addition, the Grand County Commission developed a high-density housing overlay, intended to increase the housing stock available for Grand County residents and workers, and Moab City is in the process of developing its own affordable housing project on Walnut Lane.

Other strategies proposed in the state plan to close those service gaps include supporting tenant/landlord relationships, increasing outreach with services to homeless people, providing transition services to people leaving institutions like jails, hospitals, or treatment centers, and increasing investment in permanent supportive housing.
The plan also promotes “coordinated entry” policies, meaning care organizations work together to identify people’s individual needs and ensure they can access the most appropriate services in the most efficient way possible.

Donkersloot said the Local Homeless Coordinating Committee regularly consults with state leaders.

“It’s tricky in smaller rural areas to have our voices heard,” she said. “Even though we’re small, we’re still here and we still have homeless people and we still need resources to help them.”

Locally, Melnicoff said she would also like to see a crisis resource center where people could store possessions in lockers, take a shower, get a meal and access services. To Melnicoff, homelessness is a problem that prevents individuals from addressing the other issues they may face.

“The best thing is to get people into housing,” said Melnicoff, “so they can deal with drug and mental health issues.”

“It’s a thorny issue, it’s tricky,” she said. “It’s not glamorous.”

Donkersloot urged anyone who feels they might be at risk of homelessness to contact the MVMC, even if they aren’t certain if they qualify for the count or don’t want to participate but want to talk about available services.

“We just want them to know that there are these services in town and we’d love to talk with them,” she said.

For more information or to participate in the count, please contact Sara Melnicoff of Moab Solutions at 435-401-4685 or Liz Donkersloot of the MVMC at 435-259-5444.

Moab takes part in annual national homelessness count

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– Liz Donkersloot