User

DeKalb County, the third most populous county in Georgia

Challenge

Locate, count, and survey hundreds of unsheltered homeless people in a single night to meet federal regulations

Solution

GeoForm
ArcGIS℠ Online

Results

First in the nation to geocode homeless populations: surveyed and mapped homeless people in real time, discovered locations of unsheltered people eligible for housing assistance, identified additional uses of GIS to enhance outreach, and can now track populations and trends to better allocate support and resources

Maps Locate Brighter Future for Homeless

DeKalb County's Community Development Department provides affordable housing resources to the more than 700,000 residents who call the region home. Funded primarily by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the department acts as the collaborative applicant for the DeKalb County Continuum of Care and funds several programs to prevent homelessness and help those who are homeless find shelter and stability.

The Challenge

Every other January, teams of hundreds of volunteers embark on an overnight mission to locate and count unsheltered homeless people living in DeKalb County, Georgia. Their goal: identify people in need and provide them with available resources to get back on their feet. The homeless Point-in-Time (PIT) count is mandated every two years by HUD and is fulfilled locally throughout the country.

In preparation for DeKalb County's 2015 PIT count, the Community Development Department, in collaboration with Pathways Community Network Institute, planned to execute the census in the traditional fashion: equip boots-on-the-ground teams with paper surveys, pencils, and clipboards. Volunteers would collect hundreds of data points about homeless persons, and then workers would manually enter the information from the paper surveys into spreadsheets. The data would take three or more full days to enter, and once complete, the team would cross-check the spreadsheet with volunteers' handwritten notes for errors.

The Solution

DeKalb County's 2015 PIT count would signify: (1) the county's inaugural census independent from a multicity collaborative on homelessness and (2) the first time any agency in the country would implement geographic information system (GIS) technology into its workflow. Initially in search of volunteers, the team consulted with the county's GIS department. What transpired was an idea to modernize the outdated paper survey by using the Esri® ArcGIS® platform and apply geography to discover new insights about homeless populations.

The GIS team created a custom mobile application using GeoForm, an ArcGIS web application template. The mobile app digitized the original survey and introduced new information layers. Instead of handwriting demographic data and block-level location points of unsheltered people, volunteers entered the information via cell phones. They used the app to quickly enter demographic data in a custom form, upload photos and notes, and pinpoint the exact location of each surveyed person. Teams analyzed the information in real time with live web maps and determined where to dispatch additional volunteers to high-need areas.

The Results

The ArcGIS platform helped volunteers collect reliable information faster and geolocate approximately 200 unsheltered homeless people down to the street level. The data was instantly available in spreadsheets and web maps, saving the county time and money by eliminating hours of manual data entry. Community Development confirmed existing data on where unsheltered people live and located new people in need of housing assistance.

DeKalb County can now employ the ArcGIS platform to track population patterns and trends over time to plan where and when to allocate services. With plans to expand the department's use of GIS, outreach workers are already utilizing the data to get people in need a home of their own.

"For the first time, we can drill down to the exact location of unsheltered individuals. By knowing where they are located, who they are, and how to find them, we can better serve our homeless populations and get them the help they need."

Melvia Richards
Housing Manager
DeKalb County Community
Development Department

Learn more about ArcGIS web app templates at esriurl.com/WebAppTemplates.