



Creating a More Accurate Census of Homeless People in Aurora, Colorado

Survey123 for ArcGIS Helps City Identify Those in Need

Every year in late January, communities across the United States conduct a count of their local homeless populations. These one-night 'snapshot' counts are reported to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide a better understanding of the scope of homelessness and to measure progress in the effort to reduce it.

In Colorado, the City of Aurora's new homelessness program director, Shelley McKittrick, found a way to get a more accurate count for this year's point-in-time homeless census. She worked with Aurora's geographic information system (GIS) team, led by GIS coordinator Bill Kever and GIS specialist Ryan Witsell. Using a survey built with the Survey123 for ArcGIS® app, they identified and recorded the locations of over 100 more homeless people than were included in last year's count.

The Survey123 app helped Aurora streamline a previously paper-based survey process. The app also enabled deeper geospatial insight into homelessness in the city with a population of about 360,000. GIS analysis helped identify pockets of homeless that had gone undetected in the past. The data will do more than inform HUD. It will help the city reach out to people in need.

"We're not trying to sweep our homeless people away. . . . We are trying to invite them in and provide them with services," McKittrick said. "A dot on a map is not going to help somebody. But it will help to put a dot on a map where we can find someone and offer them socks and food and bring them in for a meal or to see a medical provider."

McKittrick and Aurora's GIS team conducted a ten-minute training of Survey123 for their 40 volunteers before deploying

them into the field. Volunteers had surveys loaded onto their own smartphones before they began driving around Aurora to conduct the count. Data was collected on a no-contact basis and based on what the volunteers could see. The survey form included categories for Place of Stay: Tent, Car, Sleeping Bag, Beach, Building Alcove, and Park. The survey also asked for each homeless individual's approximate age and whether the person was inside or outside a business district.

Volunteers were largely social services providers, individuals experiencing homelessness, city council members, police officers, and parks and recreation workers, as well as faculty from the University of Colorado. With that in mind, the survey also asked whether the person conducting the data collection was familiar with the homeless individual being counted.

Finally, surveyors were asked to drop a pin on the map where they noted a homeless individual, often providing notes with the pin indicating services that would be especially helpful—medical services, food, showers, and so forth.

Survey data was updated in real time in the city's homeless census, which saved time and effort for the workers. "Real-time GIS data helped ensure [that] the city maximized its resources, as census takers could tell at a glance where other teams had or had not been already," Witsell said. "As soon as they identified someone, it would appear on the map that the location had been visited."

Information from the count is being shared with the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative, which will perform analysis and collate data from other cities in the region.

Learn more at esri.com/survey123

