Homelessness in Washington

Washington State
Department of
Commerce

2021 annual report to meet requirements in RCW 43.185c

Acknowledgments

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Executive summary

Overview

Due to the unprecedented demands on Commerce employees and homeless service providers throughout the state because of the pandemic, the report is late and abbreviated. It fulfills most reporting requirements outlined in the Homeless Housing and Assistance Act, including [RCW 43.185c.010](), [040](), [045](), [170](), [340](), and [RCW 43.63A.305]() and [311](). These are fully described in the [Annual statutory reporting requirements]() section.

This report was not completed in 2020. The [2019 report is available]() on the Commerce website.

Fiscal year 2021 highlights

- The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the annual Point-In-Time Count from occurring in 2021, making year-to-year comparisons difficult.

- Commerce staff and service providers engaged in homelessness support programs focused primarily on delivering pandemic-related funding to assist individuals impacted by the pandemic, including $1 billion in rent assistance.

- Over 11% of renter households (more than 100,000) reported being behind on rent during the summer of 2020.

- The pandemic response surfaced valuable lessons and experience to strengthen statewide and local responses to disasters, including streamlining processes to deliver assistance faster.

- Pre-pandemic systemic trends continue, including high demand for and low supply of housing units, which drives up housing costs, affecting low-income households the most.

- Governor-proposed and Legislature-funded initiatives created over 1,000 new shelter beds in 22 counties.

Annual statutory reporting requirements

Table 1: Guide to annual reporting requirements in this report

Subsection	Excerpted reporting requirements	Location in report
RCW 43.185C.045: "Homeless housing strategic plan—Annual report of department and local governments."		
(1)(a)	"An assessment of the current condition of homelessness in Washington state and the state's performance in meeting the goals in the state homeless housing strategic plan;"	"Conditions of homelessness through June 2021" and "Homeless system performance goals and targets"
(1)(b)	"A report on the results of the annual homeless point-in-time census conducted statewide under RCW 43.185C.030;"	"Point-in-Time Count"
(1)(c)	"The amount of federal, state, local, and private funds spent on homelessness assistance, categorized by funding source and the following major assistance types: (i) Emergency shelter; (ii) Homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing; (iii) Permanent housing; (iv) Permanent supportive housing; (v) Transitional housing; (vi) Services only; and (vii) Any other activity in which more than five hundred thousand dollars of category funds were expended;"	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
(1)(d)	"A report on the expenditures, performance, and outcomes of state funds distributed through the consolidated homeless grant program, including the grant recipient, award amount expended, use of the funds, counties served, and households served;"	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
(1)(e)	"A report on state and local homelessness document recording fee expenditure by county, including the total amount of fee spending, percentage of total spending from fees, number of people served by major assistance type, and amount of expenditures for private rental housing payments required in RCW 36.22.179;"	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
(1)(f) and (g)	"(f) A report on the expenditures, performance, and outcomes of the essential needs and housing support program meeting the requirements of RCW 43.185C.220; and "(g) A report on the expenditures, performance, and outcomes of the independent youth housing program meeting the requirements of RCW 43.63A.311;"	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
(3)	"Any local government receiving state funds for homelessness assistance or state or local homelessness document recording fees under RCW 36.22.178, 36.22.179, or 36.22.1791 must provide an annual report on the current condition of homelessness in its jurisdiction … the department must produce and post information on the local government's homelessness spending from all sources by project during the prior state fiscal year in a format similar to the department's report under subsection (1)(c) of this section."	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
RCW 43.185C.170: Interagency council on homelessness—Duties—Reports.		
(1)	"The interagency council on homelessness, as defined in RCW 43.185C.010 … shall report to the appropriate committees of the legislature annually by December 31st on its activities."	The Interagency Council on Homelessness did not meet due to the COVID-19 pandemic and did not produce a report to the Legislature as a result.

Subsection	Excerpted reporting requirements	Location in report
RCW 43.185C.220: Essential needs and housing support program—Distribution of funds.		
(7)(c)	"In collaboration with the department of social and health services, submit a report annually to the relevant policy and fiscal committees of the legislature. A preliminary report shall be submitted by December 31, 2011, and must include (c)(i), (iii), and (v) of this subsection. Annual reports must be submitted beginning December 1, 2012, and must include: "(i) A description of the actions the department has taken to achieve the objectives of chapter 36, Laws of 2011 1st sp. sess.; "(ii) The amount of funds used by the department to administer the program; "(iii) Information on the housing status of essential needs and housing support recipients served by housing support entities, and individuals who have requested housing support but did not receive housing support; "(iv) Grantee expenditure data related to administration and services provided under this section; and "(v) Efforts made to partner with other entities and leverage sources or public and private funds;"	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
RCW 43.185C.340: Students experiencing homelessness—Grant program to link families with housing—Program goals—Grant process—Requirements—Grantees report to the department.		
(8)	"(a) Grantee organizations must compile and report information to the department. The department shall report to the legislature the findings of the grantee, the housing stability of the homeless families, and any related policy recommendations. "(b) Grantees must track and report on the following measures including, but not limited to: (i) Length of time enrolled in the grant program; (ii) Housing destination at program exit; (iii) Type of residence prior to enrollment in the grant program; and (iv) Number of times homeless in the past three years. (c) Grantees must also include in their reports a narrative description discussing its partnership with school districts as set forth in the memorandum outlined in subsection (4) of this section. Reports must also include the kinds of supports grantees are providing students and families to support academic learning.	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
RCW 43.63A.311: Independent youth housing program—Subcontractor organization performance review and report.		
(2)(a) through (f)	The independent youth housing program report must include, at a minimum, an update on the following program performance measures, as well as any other performance measures the department may establish, for enrolled youth in consultation with the department of social and health services, to be measured statewide and by county: (a) Increases in housing stability; (b) Increases in economic self-sufficiency; (c) Increases in independent living skills; (d) Increases in education and job training attainment; (e) Decreases in the use of all state-funded services over time;	"Homeless housing project expenditure and data reports"
(2)(g)	Recommendations to the legislature and to the interagency council on homelessness as described under RCW 43.185C.170 on program improvements and on departmental strategies that might assist the state to reach its goals of: (i) Ensuring that all youth aging out of the state dependency system have access to a decent, appropriate, and affordable home in a healthy safe environment to prevent such youth from experiencing homelessness; and (ii) Reducing each year the percentage of young people eligible for state assistance upon aging out of the state dependency system.	This content is presented in a separate report that Commerce and the Department of Children, Youth and Families submitted separately: "Improving Stability for Youth Exiting Systems of Care."

Conditions of homelessness through June 2021

Responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant health impacts, job losses and other disruptions. This required an immediate health response to a highly contagious virus that had social and economic impacts. This led to an increase in the number of people unable to pay rent, which resulted in more than 11% of renters (more than 100,000 households) reporting being behind on rent during the summer of 2020. This is at least double the normal rate.

In response to the pandemic, state and local homeless crisis response funding and staff capacity were redirected to create quarantine and isolation beds, additional shelter beds, and rent assistance to prevent evictions and increase the solvency of landlords. Employees at the state and local levels typically tasked with data collection were reassigned to create housing capacity. Data collection was pared down or paused entirely to increase administrative capacity to address the disaster. Eligibility processes and other policies governing existing programs were modified to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 and related deaths.

Because there was no official statewide count of unsheltered persons in 2021, there is no accurate quantification of the impact of the pandemic on the number of people living outside. Increased pandemic-driven housing instability and reduction in existing shelter facility capacity to reduce virus transmission was a factor increasing the number of people at risk of homelessness. Adding new non-congregate shelter capacity, increased rent assistance, and an eviction moratorium were factors mitigating increased unsheltered homelessness. More people were observed living unsheltered in many communities, but those observations may have been a shift of unsheltered persons from hidden locations to more visible public places.[1] The snapshot of homelessness in Washington, produced annually via a data-sharing partnership between DSHS and Commerce, showed a 2% increase in people living in emergency shelters or unsheltered from January 2020 to January 2021 (59,464 to 60,492.)

Regular Census Bureau data collection was not completed during the pandemic, making assessments of other trends driving homelessness difficult. Future assessments of homelessness will be informed by regular data collection processes restarted in late 2021, including a count of unsheltered persons in January 2022.

Because of the pandemic, the state and communities gained valuable experience standing up new housing capacity while learning how fast processes can go when a situation is genuinely viewed as an emergency. Communities learned how to expedite eligibility determinations to speed assistance, preventing life-threatening denials of service. Communities reduced burdensome paperwork that can be difficult to complete by those most in need. And initial steps were taken throughout the state to address systemic racial inequities that cause inequitable access to housing and outcomes for those served.

As of December 2021, the homeless crisis response system capacity primarily focused on pandemic disaster response, with the delivery of more than $1 billion in rent assistance as a central goal.[2] But the pandemic will end, and the lessons learned in responding to the crisis will inform future work addressing homelessness.

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[1] Lopez, German, The New York Times, "Homeless in America: The homelessness crisis is getting worse," (July 15, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/15/briefing/homelessness-america-housing-crisis.html
[2] The state and federal emergencies were both ended by May 2023. We are still gathering data on the overall impacts of the pandemic on homelessness, and will analyze that research in the coming years.

Systemic drivers of homelessness remain

The systemic problems driving the increase in homelessness pre-pandemic remain and appear to be growing:

○ A vibrant economy that leads to growing incomes for most and related income-driven housing cost increases, leaving some people at the margins unable to afford housing costs with low and slow-growing incomes.

○ An undersupply of market rate and subsidized housing makes it difficult for people at all income levels to find a place to live, forcing those at the margins out of their communities or into unsheltered homelessness.

There are several proven approaches to attaining the state strategic plan vision of "No person left living outside." In 2020, the governor proposed, and the Legislature partially funded, an expansion of dignified and accessible shelter opportunities throughout the state. This resulted in funding more than 1,000 new beds of temporary housing in the 22 counties that applied for grants from Commerce and the funding of additional permanent supportive housing beds. Additional permanent funding enacted by the Legislature for rent assistance to prevent evictions, subsidized housing and services bring Washington closer to having the capacity to implement an at-scale solution.

Additional federal pandemic response funding helped support shelter space through hotel and motel vouchers and other non-congregant shelter spaces to provide temporary shelter and curtail the spread of COVID-19. However, these funds are temporary and will no longer be available at the end of 2023.

However, the mismatch of incomes versus affordable units persists. The state and local governments do not have an at-scale answer to the question sometimes voiced by people living outside: "Where do you want me to go?" A meaningful answer to this question can be built on different values, politics and priorities. But at this point, communities do not have agreed-upon and transparent answers to that question and the systematic at-scale response necessary to bring everyone inside to a dignified place to live.

Homeless system performance goals and targets

Performance measures help evaluate the effectiveness of a county's local Homeless Crisis Response System as counties work towards ending homelessness. Commerce has identified the following as the most critical homeless system performance measures:

- Prioritizing unsheltered homeless households and households fleeing violence
- Increasing exits to permanent housing
- Reducing returns to homelessness
- Reducing the length of time while homeless

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary changes and suspensions were made regarding grantee performance requirements.

Prioritization requirements, established in 2016, required grantees to prioritize unsheltered homeless households and households fleeing violence for services and projects. Compliance with this requirement can be demonstrated by increasing the percentage of unsheltered homeless households and households fleeing violence served or achieving unsheltered functional zero for at least two sup-populations.

In response to COVID-19, Commerce recommended that communities continue to prioritize people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and people fleeing violence because they cannot safely self-isolate or shelter in place. This means that these factors must be considered part of the local prioritization process. If the COVID-19 response plan developed with public health departments identified other prioritization factors, such as people with underlying health conditions, communities were instructed that this would be accounted for during the performance monitoring process.

Communicating performance

Commerce analyzes homeless system performance quarterly and annually to assess the degree to which systems are making progress on their benchmarks. Performance outcomes are communicated through data visualizations, which provide information on critical homeless system performance measures and contextual information about a community's homeless crisis response system.

The County Report Card provides annual performance outcomes for each county and the state. Data from all homeless housing projects participating in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) are included. Due to COVID-19, the County Report Card was not updated for state fiscal year 2020. The County Report Card was updated for state fiscal year 2021.

Previous monitoring findings showed that poor HMIS data quality affected accurate performance reporting in many communities. In response, Commerce introduced the HMIS Data Quality Dashboard in October 2019. The purpose of the Data Quality Dashboard is to provide a tool for HMIS users in the Washington Balance of State Continuum of Care to easily monitor the completeness, accuracy and timeliness of their data and make improvements as needed.

In September 2020, Commerce introduced the Equity Analysis Dashboard to facilitate the analysis of racial and ethnic disparities among people who are entering the homeless system in the Washington Balance of State Continuum of Care. Because each community has unique circumstances, the ability to drill down these racial and ethnic disparities to the county or regional level is critical in identifying and changing racial and ethnic bias in each system and service.

Performance monitoring

Performance monitoring was suspended for the contract period in response to COVID-19. However, communities monitored their progress using the [Consolidated Homeless Grant Performance Tracker](#), which was updated quarterly throughout the contract period.

Data sources

The HMIS is the data source for most of the information used in the "Washington State Homeless System Performance Reports." Homeless housing service providers use HMIS to collect and manage data while providing housing assistance to people experiencing homelessness. Other data sources include the annual County Expenditure Report and the annual Point-In-Time Count.

Homeless housing project expenditure and data report

[RCW 43.185c.045](#) requires that each county in Washington report all expenditures by funding sources (federal, state and local) for homeless housing projects in their community. Commerce combines expenditures data with Homeless Management Information System data to create an even more comprehensive report that reports expenditures and links them to outcomes.

The table below summarizes the number of beds and cost per homeless housing intervention.

Table 2: Homeless housing project expenditures for state fiscal year 2021 by intervention type

Intervention type	Total bed inventory	Total expenditures	Cost per day per household	Cost per successful exit per household
Emergency shelter[3]	13,592	$118,337,019	$54	$21,596
Transitional housing[4]	4,453	$19,201,357	$34	$17,716
Rapid rehousing[5]	7613	$73,415,478	$50	$22,053
Homeless prevention[6]	n/a	$34,005,559*	$28	$5,831
Permanent supportive housing[7]	12,552	$82,421,812	$33	$161,526

* Does not include the temporary federal funds from the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

The [state fiscal year 2021 homeless housing projects expenditure and data report](#) is on the [State Strategic Plan, Annual Reports and Audits webpage](#).

Learn how the Performance Office uses the expenditure and data report on the Commerce [Homeless System Performance webpage](#).

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[3] Emergency Shelter (ES) provides short-term temporary shelter (lodging) for those experiencing homelessness. Emergency Shelters can be facility-based or hotel/motel voucher. Emergency Shelter programs are typically designed and intended to provide temporary shelter for short- term stays: up to three months. Clients are not required to exit after 90 days.
[4] Transitional Housing (TH) is subsidized, facility-based housing that is designed to provide long-term temporary housing and to move households experiencing homelessness into permanent housing. Lease or rental agreements are required between the transitional housing project and the household.
[5] Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) quickly moves households from homelessness into permanent housing by providing: (1) Housing Identification Services: Recruit landlords to provide housing for RRH participants and assist households with securing housing, (2) Financial Assistance: Provide assistance to cover move-in costs and deposits as well as ongoing rent and/or utility payments, and (3) Case Management and Services: Provide services and connections to community resources that help households maintain housing stability.
[6] Homelessness Prevention (HP) helps households who are at risk of homelessness to maintain or obtain stable housing and avoid homelessness. Services include housing-focused case management and temporary rent subsidies.
[7] Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is subsidized, non-time-limited housing with support services for homeless households that include a household member with a permanent disability. Support services must be made available but participation is voluntary. PSH may be provided as a rent assistance (scattered site) or facility-based model. For facility-based models, a lease or rental agreement is required between the PSH project and the household. The services and the housing are available permanently.

State-funded homeless housing reports

Several RCWs require Commerce to report on expenditures, performance and outcomes of state funds for the following:

- Consolidated Homeless Grant: RCW 43.285c.045
- Housing and Essential Needs: RCW 43.185C.220
- Homeless Student Stability Program: RCW 43.185C.340
- Independent Youth Housing Program: RCW 43.63A.311

Commerce reports include the grant recipient and service area, expenditures, interventions and the number of households assisted. They may also include additional specific information required in each RCW.

The state fiscal year 2021 state-funded homeless housing reports are on our web pages.

Point in Time Count

[RCW 43.185C.045](#) requires Commerce to report on the annual homeless point-in-time census conducted under [RCW 43.185C.030](#).

Annually, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires a count of all persons experiencing homelessness in Washington during a single night in January. The count includes persons in emergency or temporary housing projects (sheltered) and those living in places not meant for human habitation, such as tent encampments, vehicles or abandoned buildings (unsheltered).

Due to difficulties and dangers imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, HUD and Washington waived the 2021 unsheltered count requirement. The regular sheltered count still took place.

[Point in Time Count results](#) by county are located on the [Commerce Annual Point in Time Count webpage](#).