

Hawaii still leads nation in homeless count per capita

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The homeless who were swept from the viaduct near Mapunapuna have moved to Ahua Street near the bike path. Homeless were waiting on Kilihau St. for a nearby storage building to open.

Hawaii continues to lead the nation with the highest per capita rate of homelessness — despite reducing the size of the homeless population by nearly 9 percent a year ago.

The 7,220 homeless people counted across the islands in January as part of an annual, nationwide homeless census put Hawaii's rate at 51 homeless people for every 10,000 individuals, the worst of all 50 states, according to a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report released Wednesday.

The District of Columbia actually had a higher rate — 110 homeless people out of every 10,000 individuals.

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Among states, Hawaii's per capita rate was followed by that of New York (45 homeless people for every 10,000 individuals); Oregon and California (each with 34 homeless people per 10,000); and Washington (29 homeless per 10,000).

Mississippi — with 1,472 homeless people — had the nation's lowest rate: five homeless for every 10,000 people.

Planning already has begun for next year's Point In Time Count to be conducted across the islands in January.

More than half a million people — 553,742 — were homeless across the country during last year's Point In Time Count, representing an overall increase of 0.7 percent from 2016, according to HUD. The number of homeless veterans around the country also increased 1.5 percent, primarily in California

In last year's count, Hawaii saw its first decrease in the number of homeless people since 2009. There were fewer homeless counted in Maui, Kauai, and Hawaii counties, but not in Honolulu, where the count grew by 19 people. Oahu's homeless population rose 0.4 percent to 4,959 people — compared with 4,940 in 2016.

Overall, the statewide homeless count fell by 701 people — to 7,220 from 7,921 people in 2016.

At the same time, several West Coast cities with high housing markets comparable to Honolulu saw their homeless populations jump. Los Angeles, for example, had a nearly 26 percent increase.

While Hawaii still carries the ignoble distinction of having the worst per capita rate in America, Katy Miller — Seattle-based regional coordinator for the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness — said the first statewide decline in eight years shows that "Hawaii is on the right path."

"Hawaii is implementing really promising practices there: increasing rapid rehousing for families, working to create and secure more affordable housing, shifting to a Housing First model," Miller said. "All of these things are very different and take some time. But they (Hawaii officials) are not seeing the increases we're seeing in other West Coast cities."

Marc Alexander, executive director of the city's Office of Housing, said, "We are in better shape than people realize."

Mayor Kirk Caldwell's efforts to buy and renovate buildings for both low-income and homeless tenants "is starting to deliver results," Alexander said. "Affordable housing is the issue of our time. That is clear. The No. 1 message is: If we can stay working together, being good neighbors to each other and focused on what works — namely housing — we will continue to see significant and measurable progress."

Scott Morishige, the state's homeless coordinator, said Hawaii is bucking the trends seen in other communities — especially those with high housing costs.

"We're really seeing the start of a different trend here in Hawaii compared to what the rest of the country is looking at," Morishige said. "We're focused on trying to orient all of our state contracts to focus on a Housing First approach, trying to move people quickly off the street and into housing and get people to a more stable place."

Social service outreach workers typically have to make repeated contacts with people who have been living on the street for years, but the efforts are paying off, he said.

Until recently social workers had few options other than “Shelter? Yes or no?,” Morishige said. “Now there’s a range of options such as housing vouchers, or drug treatment, or repairing relationships with family.”

“What people don’t see is that it’s not just an outreach worker going out one time,” Morishige said. “It may take months for an outreach worker to build trust with the person, understand the person’s back story and what their circumstances are. Once you understand someone’s circumstances, you can help them think through their options.”