

Eagle County looks to improve its services to the homeless population

Families make up a big portion of those seeking aid

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The MIRA nonprofit handles much of the outreach for homeless people and families in Eagle County.

Archive photo

By the numbers • 139: People served in Eagle County from March 2022 to August 2023. • 81: Of those people are part of a family unit. • 70: Of those people have been either put into stable housing or relocated to be with family or to places with more available services. • 45: People have some sort of disability.

For a long time, help for a homeless individual in Eagle County consisted of a bus ticket to somewhere else. That's changing.

The Eagle County Board of Commissioners on Monday heard a report about homeless services being provided by the county and its neighbors. A lot of assistance is provided by nonprofit organizations, from hospitals to local charities.

Monica Brutout of the county's housing department is also leading the efforts to help the homeless.

Brutout told the commissioners that from the beginning of 2022 to the end of August 2023, programs have served 139 people. A number of those people have also received assistance at some point from Garfield and Pitkin counties.

The county's numbers come from data compiled as part of compliance with federal grants. Those numbers require "street surveys," in which people are contacted where they are. Those surveys, though, are conducted in January.

Brutout noted there's a fairly narrow definition of "homeless." People can't be staying with friends, or be in danger of eviction, Brutout said. People need to be living without electricity or water, or living in tents or under bridges, she noted. People coming into the program also have to volunteer to get help.

Commissioner Jeanne McQueeney asked how many people are refusing services.

“There are probably 20 to 25 people we’re aware of that have chosen not to engage with (offered) services,” Brutout said.

While Eagle, Pitkin and Garfield counties are participants in the Valley Alliance to End Homelessness, the three jurisdictions have different approaches.

Pitkin County started a little before Eagle County, and contracts with Recovery Resources for day and overnight shelter. That shelter, which is always open, includes 12 beds funded by Aspen Valley Hospital and offers case management, food resources, laundry equipment and showers.

Garfield County works with Feed My Sheep, a Christian faith-based group. That shelter offers 10 beds. But, Brutout said, those beds come with behavioral expectations. Mind Springs Health provides street outreach services.

The three-county program has only existed since 2021. Brutout was hired in 2022 to lead Eagle County’s effort.

Brutout said continuing challenges include staffing, since there the caseload is relatively high. Other challenges include a relative lack of laundry and shower space – now provided by local recreation centers – language barriers, overnight shelter options and the lack of space to have confidential conversations with possible clients. Those conversations now happen in libraries or coffee shops, Brutout said.

Part of the staffing problem is that referrals tend to take a long time, with conversations lasting 30 minutes or more.

For next year, Brutout recommended expanding current programs. And there’s always data collection to do.

Commissioner Matt Scherr noted that one narrative about homeless services is that people from outside the community can come to participate in programs. Where people come from would be good information to have, he added.

Brutout said she and other participants are working on ways to get information out to people who need it without making the region a hub for people coming in to participate.