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### A survey of Albuquerque's homeless population uncovers surprising data

BY MARISA DEMARCO

Homeless people need affordable places to live—an obvious statement on its surface. But a survey released last week by the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness arrives at that conclusion and flies in the face of many assumptions people maintain about Albuquerque's homeless population, says Lisa LaBrecque, policy and advocacy director with the coalition.

LaBrecque was surprised by one of the study's findings—half the people surveyed had been homeless for less than a year. More than half said they were homeless for the first time. "It raises a lot of questions, like 'How can we help that group avoid homelessness altogether?' Because it might be a pretty straightforward solution, helping

someone get through a crisis without losing their home."

A lot of people reported they were working or that they would like to be working, according to the survey, which was conducted in January. Many reported that the services they need most are job search assistance and job training. "There's a strong idea among a lot of people in Albuquerque that people who are homeless are lazy and they don't want to work," she says. "This certainly contradicts that perception. A lot of people are working and can't afford housing."

One of the big questions given to survey participants: "What caused you to become homeless?" There were plenty of people who named substance abuse among the reasons, though they still reported that the biggest challenge in exiting homelessness was not being able to afford housing and not being able to find work to pay for housing. "But there are many with no substance abuse or mental health challenges who really are just poor and need housing," LaBrecque says.

It's not just homeless folks who face the housing crunch in Albuquerque, a city often heralded for its inexpensive properties on lists classifying the city as a business destination. Mark Allison with the Supportive Housing Coalition of New Mexico says there's a disparity in those low cost-of-living statistics. "Compared to neighbor states, housing costs are not that much," he says. "But compared to our income or our wages, that's where the gap is." Allison's coalition says it takes at least \$14.35 an hour full-time to afford a two-bedroom apartment if the apartment eats up 30 percent of that income. There are plenty of people in Albuquerque not making that wage, he says. "We need to do a better job of creating affordable housing for our workforce."

When a person's rent accounts for more than 30 percent of their income, they're in a precarious position, Allison says. The survey found 55 percent of respondents became homeless because of a crisis. "If there's an emergency health-care cost or their car breaks down or they lose their job, they can't really afford to absorb that unexpected expense and keep their housing." The Supportive Housing Coalition develops, owns and manages affordable rental housing. It's a "housing-first model" built on the idea that people can't have meaningful recovery from substance abuse or mental illness until they have stable housing. "We're trying to get folks off the street directly into housing, which is a little counterintuitive for some," Allison says.

But it's not enough, he adds. "For extremely low-income households, there are 35 units for every 100 that need it."

The survey is the first of its kind in the Duke City and was tacked onto what's called a "point-in-time count," which is done every other year to tally the number of

homeless people staying in shelters. There are about 3,000 people who experience homelessness on a given night in this city. "We always say that's an undercount, because it's so difficult to count people not staying in a shelter," LaBrecque adds. She says she hopes the survey will help inform policymakers' decisions about where to target resources. "For the first time, we have good data about what people are saying they need to end homelessness or avoid it," she says. "There's always going to be limited money, so do we spend it on an emergency shelter, or do we spend it on developing permanent affordable housing?" ●

### The survey conducted by the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness found:

- 26 percent of homeless people surveyed were employed.
- 42 percent reported incomes below \$750 a month.
- 55 percent said a crisis such as unemployment, illness, divorce, domestic violence or a natural disaster caused the loss of their residence.
- 20 percent were parents with young children.
- 48 percent had never been homeless before.
- 59 percent had been homeless for less than a year.
- 23 percent left their last permanent residence because they couldn't afford their rent or mortgage.
- 39 percent said being unable to find an affordable place to live posed a major obstacle in exiting homelessness.