

# Naples Daily News

## Collier sees big jump in homelessness due to Hurricane Ian and rising rents

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*Homeless in Collier? Data show 195 seniors, 51 veterans, 210 children, 150 domestic violence victims, among others. What's being done?*



Liz Freeman

The number of homeless individuals in Collier County has gone up dramatically to 703 this year compared to last year's finding of 462 homeless.

The "point in time" count conducted by the Hunger and Homeless Coalition of Collier County provides a snapshot of homelessness where volunteers canvass the community and survey the homeless about what has transpired in their lives.



The findings are far from scientific with variables like weather and willingness among the homeless to answer questions anonymously. The data is sent to state and federal authorities for reporting requirements.

This year's count was done Jan. 26 in Immokalee and the next day in East Naples.

Besides a 52% increase in the total number of homeless, the results found 195 homeless senior citizens compared to last year's finding of 44 seniors. That's a 343% increase.

In terms of veterans, the results show 51 veterans were homeless in January compared to 22 last year.

Overall the homeless coalition found 270 people were in emergency shelters in January, 192 were in transitional housing, and 241 were staying on the streets or in homeless camps.

Despite Collier's image of a paradise for raising a family or for retirement years, the community has been plagued with skyrocketing rental prices that has displaced service workers by the droves and scattered them to commute from less costly regions.



Hurricane Ian's devastation Sept. 28 with record storm surge effectively wiped out what limited rental options existed before.

"An ongoing housing crisis and soaring rents are pushing more and more people to the brink of eviction," the coalition said in its 2023 report on the latest data.

"Increasing numbers of homeless people are almost exclusively the result of rising housing costs and the aftermath of destruction of Hurricane Ian," according to the coalition.

Based on the U.S. General Accountability Office, a \$100 increase in median rent drives up homelessness by 9%.

According to the website, RentCafe.com, the average rent in Naples is \$2,462 for a 1,000-square-foot unit. In Fort Myers it's \$2,021 for the equivalent size rental.

Collier County commissioners in January repealed a requirement that landlords raising rents give tenants 60 days' notice, a move that several commissioners supported in the name of smaller government. Advocates for renters said the notice rule was a necessary step to protect renters from unscrupulous landlords.

### **What about children?**

There are 210 children who are homeless, up from 168 last year, according to the coalition's findings.

The Collier County School District uses a much broader definition that includes children "doubled up" with another family or in a temporary situation like a motel or shelter.

Based on the additional factors, the number of homeless students stood at 1,289 students in January when it reported its data to the coalition.

The definition by the school district includes students living with a family member, a non-family member, a guardian or in a nighttime residence not in the name of a parent or guardian.

And since January, the school district reports there are now 1,761 students as of April 17 who are homeless by the broader definition.

Under what's known as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, children are homeless if they are in families in transition and who lack a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence. In addition, a child who is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian is considered an "unaccompanied youth" under the law.

Hemi Kafle, the school district's homeless liaison, said: "Many families were displaced earlier in the school year due to Hurricane Ian. It's also no secret that the cost of living in our area has increased tremendously."



The district in recent years has added staff to assist in its effort of identifying families in need of services through the McKinney-Vento homeless education program, he said.

"This enhanced effort contributes to the growth in numbers as well," he said.

Some of the efforts working with social service agencies, government agencies and shelters, along with providing school supplies, hygiene kits and uniforms and other support, according to the school district's website.

### **What's being done?**

Jacylnn Faffer, President and Chief Executive Officer for the Baker Senior Center Naples, said:

"The elderly population is especially vulnerable to becoming homeless as many have limited retirement funds, are living on fixed incomes during a period of rapid inflation, and lack a strong social safety net."

She added: "The situation has only gotten worse following Hurricane Ian, which devastated a significant amount of what little affordable housing was available, particularly in the 55 and over manufactured home communities."

The Baker senior center after Ian launched a senior housing initiative to help get seniors into resilient housing for long term. It has partnered with the Community Foundation that gave \$1 million for the program.

About half a dozen seniors are getting placed into new manufactured homes that are sturdier and sit higher off the ground.

Wounded Warriors of Collier County, which is not affiliated with the Wounded Warriors Project, reports in its quarterly newsletter that the number of homeless veterans has been reduced roughly 50% in recent years because of efforts it its community partners.

One of Wounded Warrior's four houses for homeless veterans, Alpha House, was forced to close in the city of Naples because of Ian damage. It reopened within 90 days with the help of a \$20,000 grant from the Community Foundation.

"Our work is never done," Dale Mullin, president of Wounded Warriors, said. "The results would be a lot worse if we had not been addressing the needs of our most

vulnerable veteran population: our seniors. The private sector is making a difference."

Collier Commission Chairman Rick LoCastro, who has gone out in the field with the coalition for the homeless count for the past four years, said a rise in numbers is partially due to more volunteers working on count days and they are covering a much larger area.

"I don't believe year after year the data can be perfectly matched or compared but it is telling," he said. "The numbers are concerning in a place most citizens would consider paradise"

LoCastro said the county needs to continue its full-court press to find and assist the homeless and there are many amazing organizations in Collier County that do just that.

It's matching these people who need a "hand up" to these organizations and also convincing them to take the help, he said.

**Below are some other findings by the coalition:**

- 66 homeless people said they are facing a mental health illness; that is way down from 149 who said that in the 2022 count.
- 79 homeless people said they are substance abusers; that's down from 151 who reported that last year
- 150 homeless people said domestic violence was a factor; 161 cited domestic violence last year.
- 21 homeless people said they have HIV/AIDS; last year seven homeless cited having HIV/AIDS.