



NEIGHBORS IN NEED ALLIANCE

LA PLATA COUNTY UNHOUSED COUNT & SURVEY

PREPARED BY

PROJECT MOXIE

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BACKGROUND

Neighbors In Need Alliance (NINA) is a coalition of faith-based organizations and local advocates founded in March of 2019 to support the unhoused in Durango and across La Plata County. NINA's primary mission is "to provide a safe place to sleep for those in need." In 2020, NINA accepted responsibility for planning and opening a permanent managed camp as a tier 1 strategy in the city and county's Strategic Plan for Homelessness. With funding from the Colorado Health Foundation, NINA developed a program, management strategy, and site plan. Durango City Council denied the proposed site for this managed camp in November 2020.

After the initial proposed managed camp site fell through, NINA's efforts turned to supporting the winterization of Purple Cliffs, a sprawling encampment located on a hillside just off of La Posta Road (CR213) south of downtown Durango. NINA provided outreach to dispersed campers, facilitated community-building efforts, and worked to ensure basic human necessities were provided. At this time, NINA also initiated a temporary motel stay program for the most vulnerable unhoused individuals in Durango.



In 2021, the City of Durango and La Plata County notified NINA that Purple Cliffs must be closed due to health and safety concerns. These local governments requested NINA's assistance in educating the community on homelessness and managed camps, as well as once again trying to identify a site for a managed camp.

In May of 2021, NINA requested an extension of funds from the Colorado Health Foundation to allow for these previously granted funds to support ongoing efforts to establish a managed camp. This extension was approved, and NINA hired Project Moxie to assist with planning, community education, and communication strategies.

In the last year, the county has taken the reins in leading efforts to find a site for a managed camp. These efforts have been met with strong neighborhood resistance, as well as some unforeseen obstacles. During this time, NINA has held multiple community meetings, provided educational forums and materials, and worked closely with both the city and county in their continued efforts to bring a managed camp to fruition.

Through these efforts, it became apparent that there was a need for more accurate data on how many people in La Plata County were experiencing homelessness at any given time. It was also important for local leaders to better understand the circumstances that led to individuals becoming unhoused and the barriers those people were facing to attain long-term housing stability.

In May of 2022, NINA partnered with Project Moxie to conduct a tally count of unhoused community members living in the region, as well as a survey that collected demographic information, and invited participants to respond to open-ended questions about their lived experience. This report details the results of these efforts.



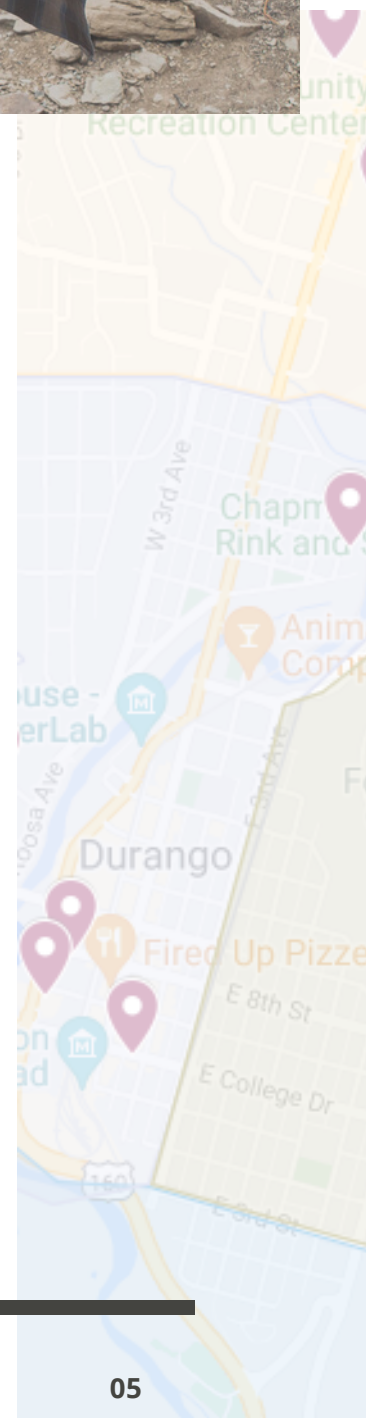
A photograph showing two men standing in front of makeshift tents made of plastic and wood in an outdoor setting. The man on the left has long, light-colored hair and is wearing a red t-shirt and a dark jacket. The man on the right has short dark hair and is wearing a dark t-shirt and a plaid jacket. They are both smiling. The background shows several tents and a dirt ground.

METHOD, DESIGN, AND RATIONALE

A tally count was chosen over a more in-depth VI-SPDAT registry week due to the time and resources needed to cover the hundreds of square miles in the region, as well as COVID-19 safety guidelines. This type of count, which has been widely used throughout the pandemic, involves utilization of teams of volunteers who are deployed to areas known to have unhoused individuals living in them and conducting a headcount. This style of documentation allows for larger areas to be considered and for a less invasive, more trauma-informed approach to gathering information regarding how many individuals are sleeping outside in a given window of time. Please see Appendix A (page 30) for a copy of the tally count form.

The strategies behind the survey and tally count effort were informed by community input. Rural homelessness presents unique challenges when it comes to data collection, and La Plata County is no exception, with abundant open spaces, rivers and mountains that provide numerous opportunities for rural camping and disbursement.

A strategic tally count was conducted in order to obtain a basic quantitative data point to illustrate need, recognizing the inherent limitations of this method. Alongside the tally count, focused interviews and surveying were completed in order to collect a sample of demographic information and to gather qualitative data from those with lived experience. More information regarding the tally count method is described in greater detail throughout this section of the report.



Planning and discussions

The following individuals came together in the Spring of 2022 to discuss the needs, questions, and outcomes of the tally count:

- Joel Berdie: Social Worker, Centura Health
- Jenn Lopez: President, Project Moxie
- Commander Jacob Dunlop: Durango PD
- Officer Dan Kellermeyer: Durango PD
- Caroline Kinser: Board Chair, Neighbors In Need Alliance
- Imo Succo: Program Manager, Southwestern Colorado Area Health Education Center
- Ann Morse: Executive Director, Manna Soup Kitchen
- Gary Meisner: Engagement Services Manager, Axis Mental health
- Carie Harrison: Executive Director, Oak Tree Youth Resources
- Nicol Killian: Community Development Director, Town of Bayfield

Through conversations with the above individuals, locations were defined where unhoused residents had been known to live. An understanding of available resources, as well as the significant challenges the region faced, was also discussed while planning the mixed method data collection effort. A regional needs assessment had not been completed on the unhoused population since 2011 when Governor Hickenlooper's team partnered with the Regional Housing Alliance to conduct a five-county VI-SPDAT registry week. At that time, this was the best practice for identifying and collecting data on the unhoused.

Stakeholders interviewed ahead of this tally count identified a clear need for additional assistance for those experiencing domestic violence, individuals re-entering society after a prison sentence, young people aging out of the foster care system, unhoused families with young children, individuals with disabilities, individuals struggling with mental health issues, those struggling to find employment, those struggling to afford housing (many of whom are gainfully employed), those requiring some assistance with accessing safety net services, and individuals in need of basic living support outside of housing, such as food, water, and clothing.

This group also identified that many individuals were living along the river closer to Manna Soup Kitchen, many in their vehicles, as well as at Purple Cliffs. Many also spoke to a recent, noticeable increase in the unhoused living at Purple Cliffs, among which were senior adults, domestic violence victims, and families, including multiple pregnant individuals. It was also mentioned that students from Fort Lewis College were known to camp and struggle to obtain stable housing. While Fort Lewis students seldom stayed at Purple Cliffs, the number of unhoused college students seemed to be growing.

Discussions also occurred with officials and providers in Bayfield and Ignacio. In both of these locations, as detailed in the survey responses described later in this report, housing insecurity and food insecurity were present, but homelessness as observed in Durango and Purple Cliffs did not appear to be prevalent.

Finally, discussions occurred with Imo Succo on indigenous homelessness and housing insecurity. These conversations covered the lack of services and housing options for Native American populations in La Plata County. Also discussed was the inadequacy of many existing services which tend to not be culturally appropriate for indigenous populations, and the harmful effects that these services models can have. While we were unable in our short timeline to conduct focused indigenous outreach, you will find in the suggested next steps that funding this outreach and survey effort will be key to the stabilization of the area. Also present in the data was a clear and substantial overrepresentation of indigenous individuals in the region's unhoused population.

On May 15, 2022, the Project Moxie team drove around the region, and specifically visited identified locations of unhoused neighbors from stakeholder conversations. Understanding that many of the unhoused neighbors with the City of Durango are under an ordinance for daytime camping, the Project Moxie team was able to locate unhoused neighbors in almost all the identified locations. There were no identifiable unhoused neighbors directly observed in Bayfield or Ignacio. Vehicles which showed clear signs of use as a primary residence were identified across the county.

Challenges identified prior to assessment

There are many challenges in any attempt to quantify homelessness, especially when such an effort is implemented in a rural or mountain community. While homeless populations in urban settings tend to concentrate around homeless services, the unhoused living outside of large cities sometimes reside in outlying, unincorporated areas that are not easily accessible. For this count, locations across the city and county were strategically identified, and multiple teams were deployed to these areas within a small window of time to avoid duplication. We must also consider that these homeless populations include numerous difficult-to-count subsets such as:

- Chronically homeless individuals who may or may not access shelter services
- Persons living in vehicles
- Persons who are unhoused with children and maintain a discreet profile for fear of having to turn their children over to CPS
- Homeless youth, who tend to be less visible than homeless adults
- Persons isolated in rural and wilderness areas
- Those who sleep in unfit and unsafe structures
- Those residing on private property

Assumptions prior to assessment

As with any study, research, or count of the unhoused population, there are assumptions that are made. For this tally count, we are assuming the information gathered by the count and surveys will be indicative of responses that would have been given at any other time during the year, and are representative of the general diversity of the study area's homeless population.

Tally count

As mentioned above, this data collection methodology allows for larger areas to be considered and for a less invasive, more trauma-informed understanding of how many individuals are sleeping outside in a given window of time. Please see Appendix A (page 30) for a copy of the tally count form used during the morning of the count.

Interviews & individual surveying

Interview sessions with local service providers, safety officers, educational institutions, and local officials were completed. These in-depth conversations allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges the region faces in supporting those in need, providing services, and ensuring safety and wellbeing. Interviews also allowed for a better understanding of what resources and programs might be implemented to address gaps and unmet needs.

Individual surveys were distributed at Fort Lewis College, Manna Soup Kitchen, Purple Cliffs, Bayfield, and Ignacio to assist in gaining knowledge of the lived experiences of those who are unhoused throughout La Plata County, and to understand the barriers they face. Surveys were administered by the Project Moxie consulting team and local providers. These surveys were anonymous, each survey was given a unique identifier to avoid duplication, and the surveys collected basic demographic information.





DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this data collection, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of unsheltered homelessness was utilized.

Unsheltered homelessness: When a person's primary nighttime residence is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus, train station, outside, etc.

Convenience sampling: A type of non-probability sample in which people are samples because they are convenient sources of data for researchers. This sample survey population was approached and engaged without a formal attempt at randomization. However, the survey sites were intentionally selected to capture a variety of segments of the unhoused population. Again, each participant was given a unique identifier to avoid duplication in the sample.

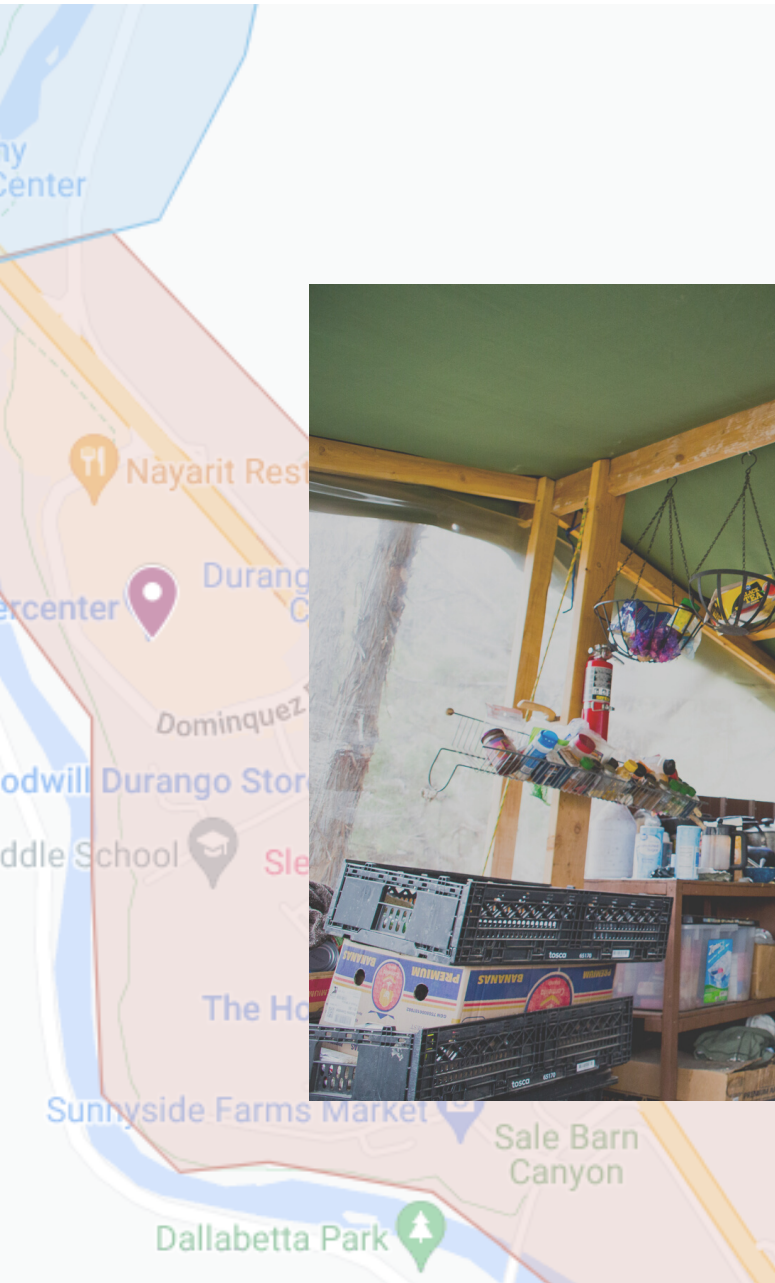
Housing insecure: This term refers to the families identified by the school district as qualifying for McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act services. McKinney-Vento services are for children and families who are homeless or who do not have a stable living situation. For example: a family residing in a low-cost hotel or automobile, or multiple families living in a single apartment.

Episodic homelessness: A state in which a person has experienced three episodes of homelessness within a single calendar year.

Situational homelessness: The status of being forced to live without housing due to a specific emergency such as a natural disaster, job loss, or death of a primary income earner. In the event of a disaster, temporary shelter may be set up for individuals to seek immediate refuge.

Chronic homelessness: Per the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), this term refers to an adult with a disabling condition or a family with at least one adult member with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for one year or more and/or has experienced four or more episodes of homelessness within the past three years.

Sheltered homelessness: Refers to individuals living in a supervised public or privately operated shelter designated to provide a temporary living arrangement that includes congregate shelters, transitional housing and hotels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state or local governmental programs.





Volunteers were required to attend a 2-hour information and training session on homelessness and the basics of a tally count on May 12th, 2022. This training included a discussion on trauma-informed care, and trauma-informed practice. These training sessions were held via Zoom for convenience of attendance. The techniques and methods that were to be utilized were reviewed during this training session.

Teams

Two-person teams were assigned to designated areas of the county for the tally count. Each team was provided with maps and tally sheets on the morning of the count. Prior to deployment, all volunteers were provided with a brief reminder of how to enumerate thoroughly and accurately without disturbing or causing trauma to the unhoused individuals they encountered.

Safety

Every effort was made to minimize potentially hazardous situations. Precautions, including the provision of PPE, reflectors, and hand warmers were in place. Law enforcement was notified of pending tally count activity to ensure awareness, and detailed locations and identification of all volunteers were on file. Finally, Project Moxie assigned a representative to be present at the starting location for the duration of the count who kept tabs on each volunteer and their location.

Street count deployment

Deployment efforts occurred between 6:30am and 9:30am on May 16, 2022.

When considering similar counts completed throughout the nation, more rural and mountain-based communities have found that a longer and earlier count is more fruitful. This early morning enumeration strategy was selected in order to avoid a duplicate counting of sheltered homeless individuals, and with the understanding that many individuals within the Durango city limits pack up and move their tents and other belongings before sunrise in accordance with the law. Personal or agency vehicles were used to transport volunteers to and from tally count areas.

A separate tally sheet was used for each identified area. Volunteers were also asked for observational comments, which discuss the cleanliness of the area, safety, etc. Upon return, each team turned in their forms, surveys, and observation comments. A short debrief with each team occurred to gain feedback and input.

Due to significant safety concerns, the Project Moxie team deployed to Purple Cliffs, and volunteers were not asked to enter this area.

Survey methodology

Surveys were distributed to ensure qualitative data about the homeless community in the county was collected alongside the quantitative tally count. Three separate surveys were deployed, each tailored to its intended audience:

- One for those actively experiencing homelessness (distributed at Purple Cliffs and Manna)
- One for those experiencing housing insecurity or some difficulty meeting basic needs (distributed in Bayfield and Ignacio)
- One for college students (distributed online to Fort Lewis College students)

The varying aspects of each survey allowed us to take the opportunity to ask detailed questions for each subpopulation being surveyed. Each survey elicited information such as gender, family status, military services, length of homelessness, recurrence of homelessness, usual nighttime accommodations, primary causation of homelessness, and access to services. Copies of survey questions are included in Appendix B on page 32. Included in each survey were open-ended questions that allowed respondents to describe details of their own lived experience. Survey respondents were given a \$15 gift card as compensation for their time (Fort Lewis students were issued a digital Visa gift card via email, and the remaining respondents were given Walmart gift cards).



RESULTS & FINDINGS

On Monday, May 16 at 6:30am, 19 volunteers and four Project Moxie team members met at Manna Soup Kitchen in Durango. Volunteers were each given information regarding their coded teams, and received resource bags and folders containing maps and tally count sheets. 9 teams then deployed to their assigned areas. Specific locations where unhoused people had been previously identified were noted on the maps.

Your team is assigned to the highlighted area below. Pay particular attention to the landmarks represented by the maroon markers that fall in your assigned area, which are the old landfill area, the Tech Center, and Greenmount Cemetery. Unhoused neighbors have been seen recently in each of these places.

Please stay within your assigned area, as other groups will be covering the areas beyond yours.

Tally totals

300 unique individuals or living units were identified between 6:30a and 9:30a. This totals 103 individuals, 158 tents and 39 vehicles. We will make an educated presumption that half of the tents and vehicles were double occupied. We base this assumption on data collected from our unhoused neighbors, and what we've directly observed at Purple Cliffs.

With that presumption, we land at an estimated 419 identified unhoused individuals residing in La Plata County.

The results of the tally count found that 39% of the individuals identified, 96% of identified tents, and 17% of identified car camping was associated with Purple Cliffs. That being said, multiple other locations, including areas around Ska Brewing, the cemetery, X-Rock, West 160, and Downtown Durango produced a positive count of individuals, tents, and/or inhabited vehicles.

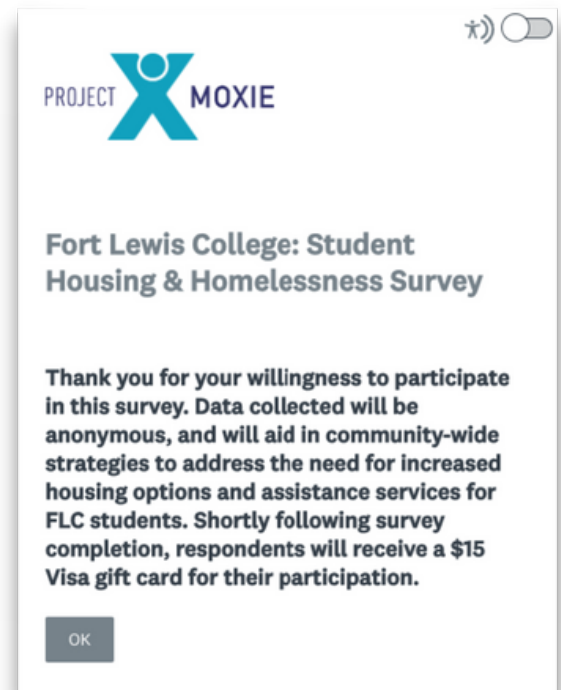
Importantly, discussions with unhoused neighbors during the count revealed that upwards of 20 children, 2 pregnant individuals, and multiple victims of domestic violence who were said to be living at Purple Cliffs, but were not visible during the count. Our team was also informed by several sources that whole families were living in their cars, and this observation was validated during subsequent surveying efforts at Manna.

Survey findings

Surveys were broken down into 3 distinct opportunities.

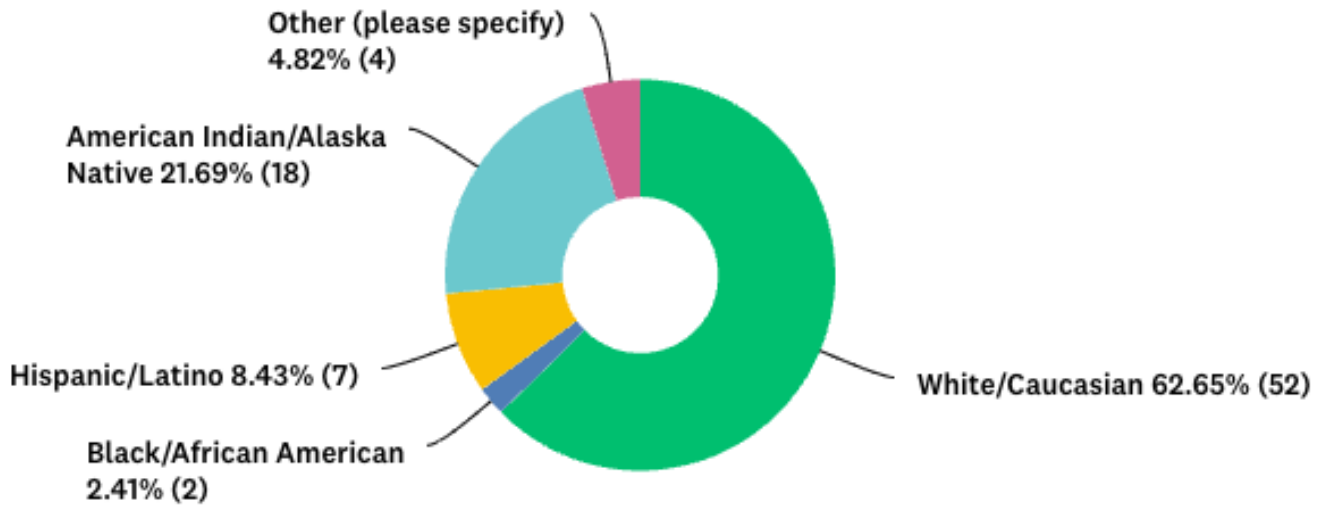
First, Fort Lewis College, with the assistance of Dr. Paul DeBell, initiated a two-week online survey from May 2 through May 13. With the assistance of the student government and Dr. DeBell, the survey was completed by 135 participants. Visitors to Manna Soup Kitchen were surveyed on May 17 resulting in 58 surveys collected. The same survey was administered at Purple Cliffs on the following day (May 18), where a total of 29 surveys were collected. Joel Berdie, a local social worker, conducted surveys in Ignacio and Bayfield on May 23, 24, and 25, resulting in 34 surveys from people residing in the Pine River Valley.

In total, 256 surveys were collected and analyzed.



Manna Soup Kitchen and Purple Cliffs survey findings and key takeaways

Among those surveyed and Manna and Purple Cliffs, 21.6% of respondents identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN). The most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 7.7% of those living in La Plata County identify as AIAN, showing a nearly threefold overrepresentation of Natives in La Plata County's unhoused population. This underscores the need for culturally-appropriate services for unhoused Natives, including Native-focused housing solutions.



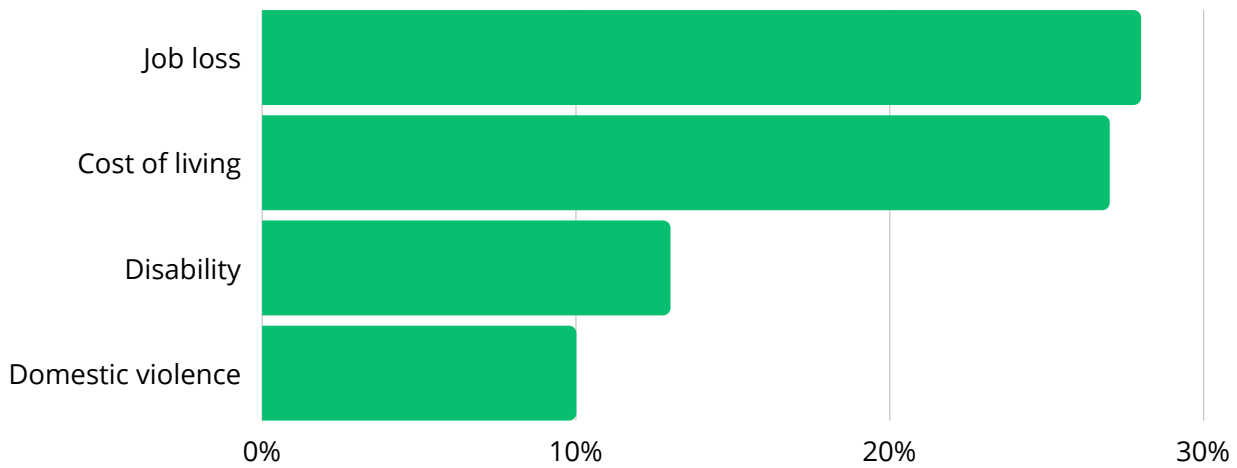
More than 1 in 5 surveyed (21.4%) reported that they are currently living in their vehicle. Car camping can often be less visible than other forms of homelessness, and safe parking initiatives can be highly effective in assisting those living in their vehicles with finding stable housing.

An overwhelming majority, nearly 80%, report not accessing shelter or housing resources in the last 30 days. While more than half of respondents report that this is not their first bout with homelessness, 41.4% say this is the first time in their life that they've been without stable housing.

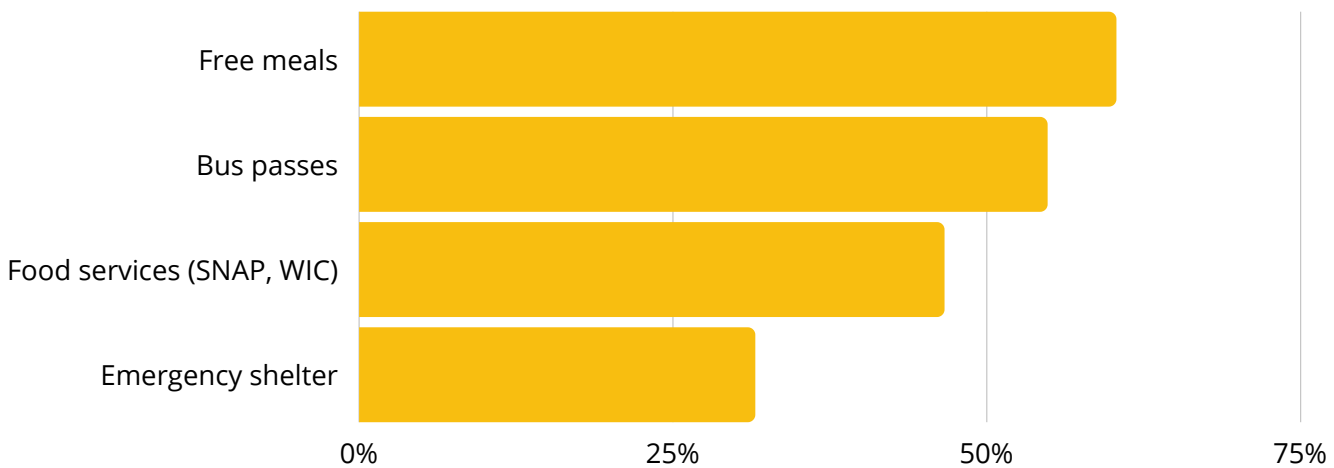
The most recent census data shows that about 8% of the general population in La Plata County arrived in the area in the last year. Just over 30% of the unhoused population report living in the area for one year or less, so there is more transience among the unhoused population. However, it would be inaccurate to say that this is true of the majority of the area's unhoused. More than two thirds of the unhoused have been in the area for more than two years, with well over a third reporting that they have lived in the area for six years or longer. Many were born and raised in the area.

In identifying their reasons for moving to the area, the unhoused cite reasons that are presumably common among the general population. For example, 15% moved to La Plata County to be closer to family, 11% moved to the area for reasons related to work or education, and 13% cited the area's natural beauty and access to the outdoors as their primary reason for relocating. Only 6% reported moving to the area due to the ability to access services and shelter.

The most common events identified as the primary cause of homelessness are job loss (28%), cost of living (27%), disability (13%), and domestic violence (10%).



In addition to basic needs such as food and shelter, bus passes were identified by more than half of survey respondents as a service that would be useful. This question instructed participants to select any and all services they would find useful (check all that apply). This data indicates that the unhoused in the area may be having difficulty accessing necessary transportation. Transportation is vital for securing employment, accessing services, etc.

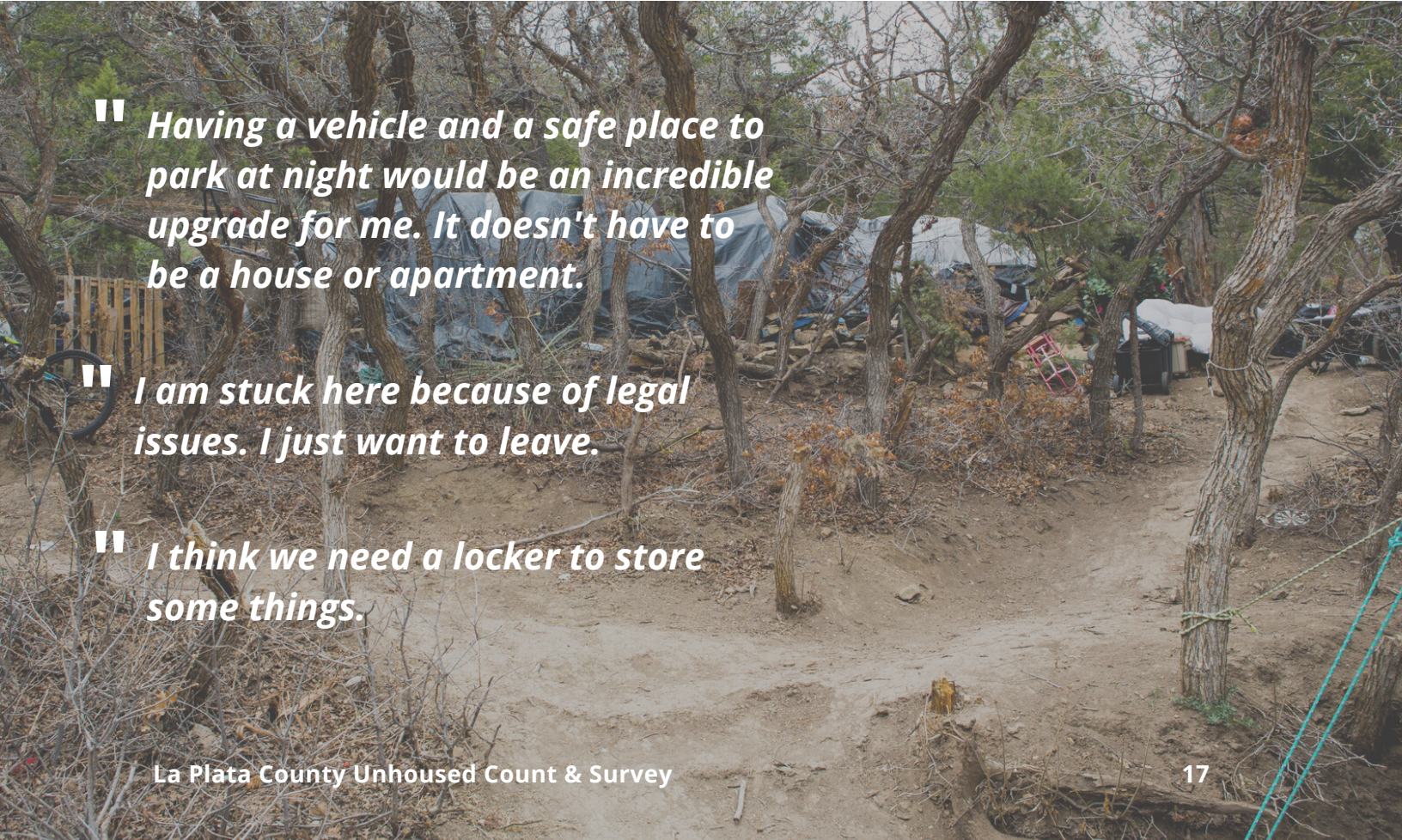


Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) of the unhoused surveyed are employed. Those without jobs cited a variety of significant barriers to obtaining employment when specifically asked what prevented them from getting a job. These barriers include health problems and/or disabilities (33%), lack of vehicle or reliable transportation (18%), missing vital documents such as identification and social security (13%), and lack of housing (10%). Whether or not it was specifically identified as a barrier to employment, more than half of respondents (55.4%) are in need of vital documents such as an ID or social security card.

When asked whether they'd be interested in utilizing a managed camp, 47% responded favorably. Another 11% responded with some variation of "maybe" or "it depends." This indicates well over half of all survey respondents would be at least open to the idea of moving into a managed community.

This receptiveness to the idea of a managed camp is slightly lower among those surveyed at Purple Cliffs. Among that cohort, 33% reported that they would be interested in moving into a managed camp, and another 16% said they might be open to it. This means that about half of those surveyed at the Cliffs are not interested in a managed camp at this time.

Narrowing the responses to only those surveyed at Purple Cliffs, when asked what they would do if Purple Cliffs closes, 30% said they were unsure where they would go, 26% said they would relocate to downtown or "the streets," and 13% indicated that they would find another outdoor location.



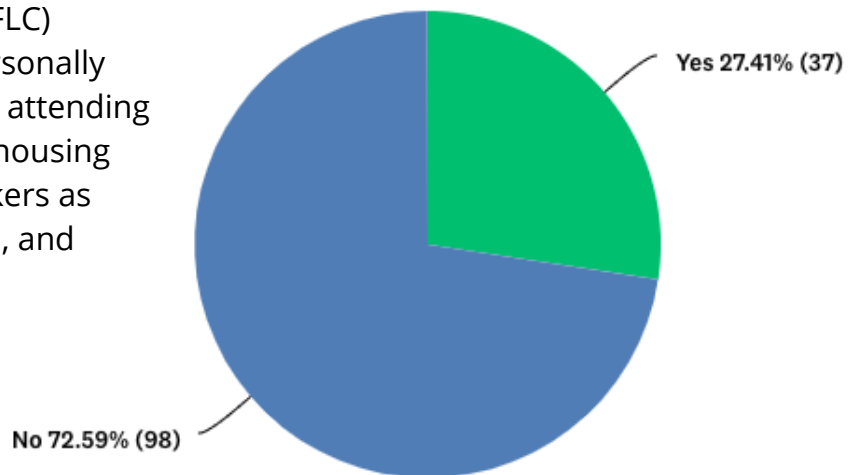
“ Having a vehicle and a safe place to park at night would be an incredible upgrade for me. It doesn't have to be a house or apartment.

“ I am stuck here because of legal issues. I just want to leave.

“ I think we need a locker to store some things.

Fort Lewis College Survey Findings

More than 1 in 4 Fort Lewis College (FLC) students (27.4%) reported having personally experienced housing insecurity while attending FLC. In the context of this question, “housing insecurity” was defined for survey takers as “not having access to safe, affordable, and reliable housing.”



When responses were narrowed to just those who indicated they had experienced housing insecurity during their time at FLC, more than half (54%) reported “sleeping in a place not normally used for sleeping, such as a friend's couch.” Just over 20% reported utilizing a local hotel or motel, just over 10% reported sleeping in their vehicle, and only 1 respondent said they had slept outdoors. This indicates that housing insecurity among FLC students is a far less visible issue than the homelessness occurring among the broader La Plata County population.

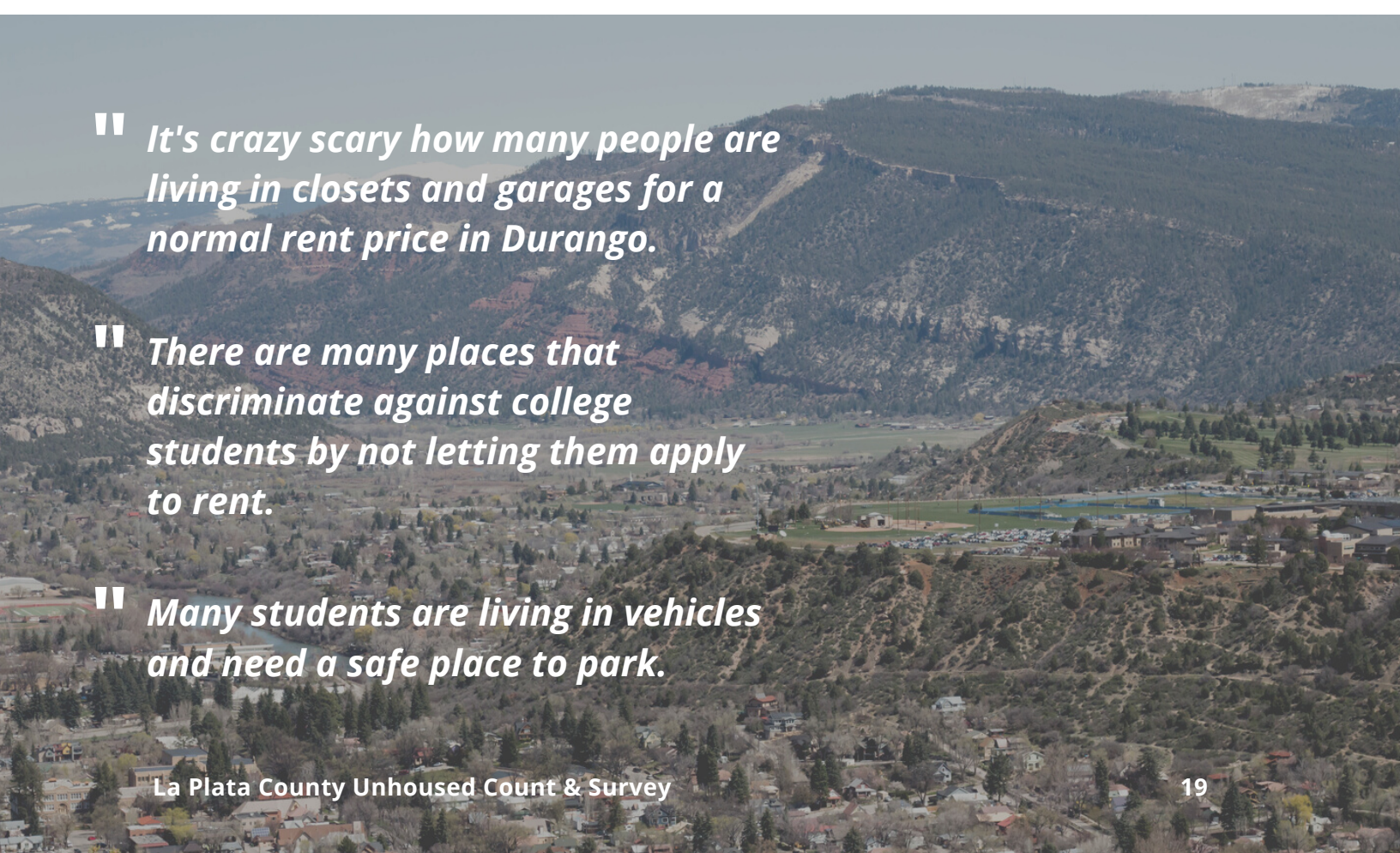
Far and above the most common reasons cited for housing insecurity were housing affordability and availability. “It almost seems like you need a full time job to just keep up with rent,” said one student. “There are also many jobs that don’t pay well without having so many years experience. How can I achieve this when I am barely in college?” Another noted, “I feel as much as I work I’m always going to have to find roommates to split high rent. Housing around Durango either is too expensive or many properties do not allow students. This really leaves very few options for students. It really is a frustrating issue.”

Among those reportedly experiencing or having experienced housing insecurity, nearly half (46.8%) report that they are not receiving assistance services. This indicates that efforts to connect students in need with available resources might be improved. Those who did indicate accessing some assistance services noted receiving financial assistance from scholarships and/or family (15.6% of respondents) and SNAP/EBT benefits (12.5% of respondents).

When asked an open-ended question about what services or resources would be helpful, the most common response was rental assistance or financial aid to offset high housing costs (21.9%) followed by some variation of increased availability of affordable housing options for students (14.2%).

A handful of respondents cited a desire for housing navigation or counseling services to help identify available affordable units in the community (mentioned in some form by 7.6% of respondents). “I would appreciate an advocate to help us find off-campus housing as campus housing cannot accommodate me and other students,” said one. Another noted they’d appreciate “a person on campus to assist with off-campus housing.”

An emerging theme throughout the survey respondents, noted by well over a dozen individuals, was that many properties in the community specifically state that they are not open to accommodating students. In addition to navigating historically high rents, wages that have not kept pace with cost of living, and a severe shortage of available housing units, FLC students must overcome the additional barrier of landlords who simply refuse to rent to them.



“It's crazy scary how many people are living in closets and garages for a normal rent price in Durango.

“There are many places that discriminate against college students by not letting them apply to rent.

“Many students are living in vehicles and need a safe place to park.

Bayfield & Ignacio survey findings

Survey efforts in Bayfield and Ignacio were limited, and conversations with local authorities indicated that homelessness as observed in and around Durango is far less common in these areas. Surveys were collected at the main supermarket in Ignacio and the Pine River Library in Bayfield, which opened survey responses to a wider range of community members as compared to the more targeted demographics surveyed in Durango. This is borne out in the data, as 85% of respondents reported that they were currently in stable housing. The other 15% reported that they were experiencing or had previously experienced housing insecurity.

When responses are narrowed to focus on the small sample of respondents indicating active or previous experience with housing insecurity, none report accessing shelter or housing services in the past 30 days, the majority (75%) report cost of living as the primary cause of their housing insecurity, and affordability and lack of available housing were cited by each of these respondents as barriers to stability. With the exception of one retired respondent, each of the housing insecure respondents had full-time jobs.

When asked for additional information about housing in Pine River Valley, many, including those who were stably housed, validated the issue in their community. Several cited rising rents as stagnant wages a threat to long-term stability. "Rental prices have far outpaced wage growth for the area," said one survey taker. "Wages do not equal housing prices," noted another. "Employers need to increase wages to help the locals afford housing."

Observations regarding the Pine River Valley

How residents experience and define housing stability and homelessness varies greatly within La Plata County. In the small towns and rural communities that make up the Pine River Valley, including Bayfield and Ignacio, public service providers were clear to say that "homelessness" does not exist in these areas in the same way that it does in Durango. A city official in Ignacio estimates that "less than 10 total" individuals experience homelessness, and a sergeant with the Ignacio Police Department stated that, "We have three individuals who meet that category; one's in jail, one's at the state hospital and the other is off her meds and probably heading to the state hospital. She's up at Mercy [Hospital] now."

Other community members at the supermarket in Ignacio expressed concern that "some folks are living just down the road in those empty trailers...it's so sad." Others spoke directly about issues related to water access, the lack of regional transportation, and rising housing prices as a result of people getting priced out of Durango and moving to the Pine River Valley.

One provider also acknowledged the issue of individuals not having stable housing as they exit institutions such as substance use treatment or jail. "People come out of [substance use] rehab, and then are right back into the same crap" because they do not have anywhere else to go, they said.

This was consistent with other service providers' description of how people make it work in the region. "You cannot be homeless in the Pine River Valley," said one. Many residents who access public services may camp during the summer time to save on rent, double up with other families, and tend to take offense to being lumped into the same category as those experiencing more visible forms of homelessness. There is a firm sense of pride in being from the Pine River Valley and not needing services from Durango. When surveyors identified themselves as being affiliated with a Durango-based organization surveying "homelessness and housing instability in La Plata County," there was some resistance. Consequently, a community council in the Pine River Valley denied surveyors the opportunity to collect data during a food distribution/pick-up time. This was a limitation in the data collectors' ability to target households who may face housing instability as well as food insecurity. Subsequent data collection occurred at the main supermarket in Ignacio and the Pine River Library in Bayfield which opened survey responses to a wider range of community members as compared to the main demographic surveyed in Durango. Nonetheless, numerous respondents expressed gratitude for the data collection in describing the issue of housing insecurity as "so important for our community."

A few community members stopped to chat with data collectors and spoke about their specific experience, including a Bayfield resident who felt he might be kicked out of a local RV park any day. He described "developers" as being the true culprit of his housing instability and felt that his landlord was just waiting for an outside developer to purchase the land. In the meantime, that landlord was increasing the price of the rental space by \$200, despite the park not having access to potable water, and knowing the gentleman had nowhere else to park his camper. Living on social security fixed income, it was obvious that this man did not know what his next step would be.





2021 Root Policy Five-County Housing Needs Assessment

A five county housing needs assessment conducted by Root Policy and published in the summer of 2021 serves as the most recent comprehensive dataset on housing needs for La Plata County. It provides important context on broader regional housing trends and the growing un-affordability throughout the southwest region of Colorado. Overall, the region has focused on providing housing to seasonal and vacation homeowners. The creation of units that favor seasonal residents directly impacts local residents and lower income households. As noted in their report, there is not a single county within the region that has been able to keep up with local housing needs. With single family homes being the most commonly approved type of housing, affordable units, smaller units, and attainable units were not created at meaningful scale. This has directly impacted the ability for hundreds of individuals and families to find stable housing options within the area.

Market Study

A recent market study created for Residences at Durango, a 120 unit affordable housing project in development, identified that more than half (54%) of current renters in the market area are rent-burdened (paying 30% or more of their income for rent). These 1600 plus renter households are just a paycheck or two away from housing instability and potential homelessness. Although the local community has been very successful in developing affordable housing projects over the last five years, it cannot keep up with the significant demand for rents that match local wage scales.

Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado

Durango is rated the second most expensive community in Southwest Colorado in terms of household income needed to make ends meet, according to a report released this year by the Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado. The report takes into account housing and income data from communities in Region 9, which includes La Plata, Archuleta, Montezuma, San Juan and Dolores counties. According to the report, a typical family of four must have two working adults who each make at least \$20.55 per hour to live affordably in Durango. In contrast, the same family could earn \$17.07 (two working adults) to live affordably in Mancos and Cortez, which are ranked the least expensive communities in Southwest Colorado. And in Pagosa Springs, the most expensive community, a family of four would need dual incomes of at least \$21.97 per hour, according to the report.

Wells Group forecast

According to the Wells Group's annual forecast in 2022, La Plata County simply does not have any housing inventory. Wells Group owner John Wells said, "In 43 years of doing this in La Plata County, this is the lowest (housing inventory) I've seen in that entire time." Wells said there are a number of construction projects happening to increase housing stock, but nothing like the county saw before the Great Recession in 2008. According to Wells Group's statistics, the housing stock in La Plata County is down 60% from last year, and demand is up 12%.

"If you look strictly at housing, the supply of single-family housing units, condos and townhomes is down 50% from where it was last year, and last year it was down almost 50% from the year before that," said analyst Bob Allen. Single-family home prices are up by 20%, which has the median home price in La Plata County up to \$600,000, up from \$500,000 in 2020.

The City of Durango is a similar story, with the supply of homes down 50% from the previous year, and demand down 4%. According to numbers released by the Wells Group, the single-family housing stock for 2021 was around 22 homes. All of these statistics point to a long-term challenge in preventing ongoing increases in housing insecurity and homelessness.



National trends and the pandemic

The City of Durango and La Plata County are not alone in their struggle to build for and provide attainable housing units. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the creation of low income housing shrank around the nation. Since then, housing prices have continued to rise, and wage growth has failed to keep pace. As a result, we have seen a prolonged shift toward poverty and wealth inequality. These trends have been exacerbated and accelerated by destabilizing events such as The Great Recession and the coronavirus pandemic.

According to the most recent CPI report released in July of 2022, rents are rising at their fastest rate since 1986. As a result, homeless shelters across the country are reporting serious issues with capacity, with some seeing their waitlists double or triple in size from their pre-pandemic levels just three years ago. While the most acute phase of the pandemic may be behind us, the economic effects continue to exact an enormous toll, and we can expect to see a nationwide increase in homelessness for the foreseeable future.



A photograph of two men sitting in a campsite. The man on the left is wearing a dark hoodie and a cap, and the man on the right has a long white beard and is wearing a dark jacket. They are sitting in folding chairs. In the background, there are tents, including a blue Coleman tent, and a rocky hillside with sparse vegetation.

SUGGESTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

La Plata County faces many of the struggles commonly associated with rural homelessness. While all three defined types of homelessness—chronic, episodic, and situational—are present throughout the region, there is a disproportionately high level of situational homelessness. COVID-19, economic downturn, exorbitant rent and housing costs, and inflation have left many households housing-insecure or homeless. There is also a significant portion of Fort Lewis College students who are struggling with housing insecurity and homelessness while attending the college. Many of these students receive scholarships for their education, but these funds do not cover food or housing subsidies. For others, attending college full time while working a part time position does not provide adequate income to pay for secure and safe housing options within the area.

Alongside the struggle for affordable housing options, there is an increasing population of unhoused neighbors living at Purple Cliffs. This area was defined as a safe place for unhoused neighbors to sleep for the last two years, but with continued inflation, COVID-19, the need for housing options and resources, as well as other barriers, the population calling Purple Cliffs home has continued to increase. This population includes students, families, domestic violence victims, seniors, as well as episodic and chronically unhoused people in need of further services and affordability assistance.

At this time, it is vital to note that Purple Cliffs is set to close on September 30, 2022. The City of Durango and La Plata County have created a working group to try and identify feasible solutions for the population of unhoused neighbors once this site is no longer available. In this tally count, 39% of the identified individuals, 96% of identified tents, and 17% of identified car camping was associated with Purple Cliffs. Closing this site will result in the displacement of hundreds of individuals. It will cause the loss of showers, food, kitchen access, and continued service provision. This will be a major destabilizing event, the effects of which will be felt throughout the entire community.

The results of this tally count and surveying effort lead us to recommend the following actions for the community to consider over the next 3 to 6 months:

Immediately devise and implement an emergency plan for Purple Cliffs residents based on vulnerability indexing, trauma-informed care, and best practices.

The local government needs to develop a trauma-informed approach to closing Purple Cliffs. There are several consulting groups regionally and nationally that have expertise in managing programs and outreach efforts for the unhoused and the local governments might consider using experts to devise this strategy. This approach should include triaging as many campers as possible to identify their needs and relocating as many campers to other programs, locations or even communities if they have support in other locales.

Increase programming capacity immediately.

With the closure of Purple Cliffs, and the existence of other camps dispersed throughout the community, multiple new programs for unhoused individuals will likely be needed to address community needs. Many communities are finding safe parking programs, managed camps or safe outdoor spaces and hoteling programs to be the most realistic solutions to address unhoused needs over the next 12-24 months. Both the state and federal governments have begun to embrace these less traditional programmatic models and are funding these types of programs. Increased capacity may include using experienced consultants, recruiting providers from outside the area, investing in local groups with expertise and the willingness to expand and manage new initiatives, and increasing efforts to engage local employers and civic organizations to take part in identified solutions. With campers being dispersed, there will be an increased need for outreach services within the next 45 days and the community should discuss options with existing providers.

Equip the coordinating council on homelessness to play a strategic role going forward.

The community has a relatively new coordinating council on homelessness managed by Manna. This group will be engaged over the coming weeks to see how its members might provide assistance to these efforts to transition residents at Purple Cliffs. The current council has several members, has not yet confirmed its role, and may need to be restructured to be more nimble and active to support the closure of Purple Cliffs. Manna is working with Project Moxie on how to structure the council to be most effective during this critical time.

Ensure the provision of appropriate services for those in supportive housing so that these tenants remain housed.

Another critical need is for additional behavioral health services and housing tenancy support to ensure that those accessing housing can remain housed. Espero Apartments is a new permanent supportive housing (PSH) project that opened in October of 2021. It provides 40 units of permanent supportive housing for the chronically homeless. Based on feedback from residents and area service providers, additional services may be required at Espero to ensure tenants find stability and remain housed.

Supporting efforts like this one are critical to decreasing homelessness in the near future. Existing programs such as Lumien, and scattered site PSH programs are also in need of additional services funding. The state of Colorado is working on pilots to develop ways for Medicaid billing to increase services for housing projects, but it will likely be a few years before these programs are developed and available locally.

In summary, the community should consider the closing of Purple Cliffs as a full-scale emergency, and do all that it can to expedite alternative programming and sites, identify resources and execute agreements to third-parties to develop safe parking, a managed camp or two and other solutions identified over the coming weeks. Other communities have used emergency or public health declarations to get around bureaucratic rules in order to develop solutions as quickly as possible, and such measures may need to be taken in La Plata County.

We are only 3-4 months from cold weather, and timing is of the essence. Simply closing Purple Cliffs without providing some alternatives will cause significant suffering and trauma, and will likely result in loss of life this winter.



Strategies over the next three years

La Plata County's Strategic Plan on Homelessness published in early 2020 provided an inventory of existing programs and players and cataloged strategies that would be pursued over the next few years. The plan focused on building capacity for coordination through a resource center and a new community position dedicated to homelessness. The pandemic hit 6 weeks after the plan was adopted, and many efforts were stalled as the community pivoted to address the public health crisis.

As the community emerges from the acute phase of the pandemic, there is a "new normal: where we have an affordable housing crisis of unprecedented scale, and can anticipate a growing number of households falling into homelessness as a direct result. Once the community has addressed the closure of Purple Cliffs, it should consider updating its strategic plan to address the following new challenges and opportunities:

1) Local leaders should look towards new funding opportunities at both the state and federal levels to assist with new programs to address increased homelessness as a result of the pandemic and corresponding housing crisis. Additionally, existing funding such as that which is available through HUD's Continuum of Care programs has not been fully utilized by the region, which suggests an opportunity for advocacy and involvement with the state and designated lead agency, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, to increase resources for local homelessness programs.

2) The pandemic created significant housing instability nationally, and in response to this, the federal government has provided billions in assistance. The State of Colorado has provided over \$600 million for rent assistance and eviction prevention programming. The local community should explore ways to increase access to these resources through partnership with statewide providers such as the Covid-19 Eviction Defense Project. This newly-formed nonprofit combines rent assistance and legal services to keep people housed.



3) The community needs to double down on affordable housing development and housing advocacy. The community is ripe for a coalition that can advocate for local funds and more aggressive housing policy, as well as be a voice at the state capitol where legislators are creating significant housing policy each year that can help resource local efforts.

4) The community should begin considering ways to fund ongoing programming for the unhoused. Federal, state and philanthropic resources funded Covid responses but long-term support for programs such as safe parking or managed camps will likely fall to local communities. We are seeing several communities in multiple states identify public funding tools such as a behavioral health tax to provide ongoing support for these types of programs. Colorado communities should anticipate having to provide significantly more resources to addressing homelessness and many are prioritizing their local ARPA resources to specifically address the rise in homelessness.



Appendix A: Tally Count Form

**LPC Tally Count
May 16, 2022**

Full Legal Name: _____
Email Address: _____
Phone Number: _____

Location:

Time of Arrival:
Time of Departure:

TALLY CHARTS

Men	
Women	
Undetermined	
Tent	
Vehicle	
Child	

THIS FORM IS DOUBLE SIDED

Comments

In the space below, please describe the area(s) you observed today. For example, were people next to a bank, in a park, at a gas station? Was the area clean? Were people in need of basic items like tents, sleeping bags, coats, etc.? Were people using wall outlets on sides of buildings (if applicable)? Did you observe families? If you saw children, please describe your estimated age. Include any other information you would like to provide.

THIS FORM IS DOUBLE SIDED

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Manna Soup Kitchen & Purple Cliffs Survey Questions

Visit <https://bit.ly/purplecliffsmanna> to view and download survey questions

Pine River Valley Survey Questions

Visit https://bit.ly/prv_survey to view and download survey questions

Fort Lewis College Survey Questions

Visit https://bit.ly/flc_survey to view and download survey questions