

## POINT-IN-TIME SURVEY

“I’ve seen too much Hell, and you can’t unlearn that.”

The statement wasn’t made casually. No one should have to witness what this person saw as a child.

I’d later learn that my new acquaintance made productive use of a period of incarceration, earning a college degree. So I know he chose the word “unlearn” carefully.

In my three hours as a volunteer Point-In-Time counter with The Valley Community Services Board (VCSB), I would have several conversations similar to this one.

## VOLUNTEER COUNTERS NEEDED

A good portion of my work revolves around issues related to housing insecurity. I was in one such meeting when VCSB staff put out a call for volunteers for the Point-In-Time survey. Each year, a team goes out to collect data on community members experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The process involves both a numeric count, as well as a brief anonymous survey. The results of which directly affect community funding to fight and prevent unsheltered homelessness. A few weeks after agreeing to volunteer, I entered a VCSB office to meet a group of nine other people. We broke into teams, each assigned to a different geographic area. I joined the team assigned to Waynesboro.

## STARTING THE COUNT

It was early evening when I get situated in the front seat of a minivan, and eventually beneath four boxes filled with Little Caesar’s pizzas on my lap. The rest of the team knows each other well, and they entertain themselves, laughing, until we reach our first stop. Tonight we will visit a laundromat, a tent-city in the woods, and some other places known to provide shelter to the unsheltered.

At our first stop, I’m quickly reminded that homelessness is not limited by age, gender or ethnicity. I am surprised that many of the community members to be surveyed are younger than me, though I doubt anyone could guess that based solely on appearance.

It’s evident that the VCSB workers have spent months and years building both trust and relationships. Almost every person at this first stop is greeted by their first name or nickname. For anyone witnessing the exchange, it would have come off as old friends catching up. Maybe that’s why so many of them felt comfortable sharing their story in my presence.

Many of those stories were not easy to hear.

The last person we interviewed at the first stop was someone who I knew personally. My heart grew heavier with each survey answer they provided.

## COUNTING IN THE DARK

The Point-In-Time count isn’t an exact science. There’s no specific way unsheltered has to look. At a few stops, we don’t find anyone. I learned that’s typical for this time of the year.

It's now very dark as we begin to wrap up – counting the most people our team leader has ever counted in years – and the temperature gets colder.

My gloves, long johns, thermal hat, winter jacket and two pairs of socks aren't as effective at fighting the cold as they were earlier. I want to get warm. It's not lost on me that "warm" won't be an option for many of the people we are interviewing.

That's difficult to process. Especially when you're face-to-face. Yet I'm always amazed at people's empathy for others despite their own adverse circumstances. For every one time I heard someone ask for a blanket or something personal, I heard twice as many people ask for something for someone else.

"Please help my sister." "We just need dog food."

#### COMPLETING THE COUNT

Even though I know homelessness doesn't have an age requirement, it still didn't prepare me for how our last official stop concluded. About that, I can only say that no one that young should be out there.

#### THE RIDE HOME: THOSE THAT NO LONGER COUNT

As the four of us drove home, part of the conversation veered toward the people we didn't count: like the community members who were part of the 2022 count, but have since found housing. It's not that those community members will now live "happily ever after." There are still a lot of barriers between them and a better quality of life. However, they are no longer part of the unsheltered homeless population.

They know where they will sleep tonight and tomorrow night.

For those of us working on housing insecurity issues, these are huge wins. It's the encouragement we need. It's our reminder that our labor can make a difference.

That's got to "count" for something.