

LONG ISLAND**Census Bureau counting homeless population across country this week**

David Sinclair is chief development officer for The INN, a nonprofit volunteer organization in Hempstead that also provides temporary shelters, a soup kitchen and 10 long-term housing facilities. Credit: Howard Schnapp

By Olivia Winslow

olivia.winslow@newsday.com

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The U.S. Census Bureau has been counting the homeless population across the nation this week, with visits to homeless shelters, soup kitchens, outside encampments, transit centers and more, as it nears the end of its once-a-decade tally of the nation's population.

The bureau said the count, which started Tuesday and ends Thursday, has been aided by information from service providers, municipal governments and others in the community.

"Over the three-day period, we'll visit all service-based locations, so mobile food banks, soup kitchens, homeless shelters," said Jeff Behler, the bureau's director of the New York regional office, which covers New York, New Jersey, the New England states and Puerto Rico.

On Thursday morning, census takers are scheduled to visit subway stations and outside encampments. "We've cataloged those locations over the past year-and-a-half," Behler said.

On Wednesday, census takers visited the Center for Transformative Change Resource Center in Hempstead, one of the facilities operated by The INN, a nonprofit volunteer organization that also provides temporary shelters, a soup kitchen and 10 long-term housing facilities. Census takers there declined to comment.

Greta Guarton, executive director of the Long Island Coalition for the Homeless, said "the approximate number of people in shelters on any given night was around 3,800 in January, when we conducted our annual Point In Time count."

Guarton said the coalition doesn't operate shelters, but has been conducting outreach to the homeless population. "We have been working with individuals living on the street and encouraging them to complete the census," she said.

She said the coalition has provided census staff with information about where the "unsheltered" homeless can be found and even offered to accompany census takers to those places, but were rebuffed. Behler explained that because of privacy restrictions, "Only census

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workers can go out and do this count."

Guarton said she was skeptical of census takers' ability to persuade some people who aren't in shelters to cooperate with someone "going in with a clipboard. ... I will say, generally speaking, there's a trust factor there." So, she said, "The coalition is making efforts ... to ensure that unsheltered individuals with whom we are working with are completing the census."

Rebecca Sanin, president and chief executive of the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island, whose group is leading the Island's Complete Count census campaign, is worried as the count nears its Sept. 30 finish.

"It's sort of irrational to think there could be an accurate count of the homeless population in such a tight time frame," Sanin said.

Noting the impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on the Census Bureau's field work, overall, "I worry that any count is going to fail to account for what the region will need in the next 10 years," she said.

The census count affects the distribution of billions of dollars in federal aid to states.



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