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Smart Counts

SPOKANE - At first glance the top-line news announced at an April 18, 2018 press conference by the Spokane City and County Continuum of Care wasn't good. From January 2017 to January 2018, they reported, the number of homeless in the city had risen 14 percent. Unsheltered homeless had more than doubled. Reasons enough for those who'd worked on the Continuum's Everybody Counts January, 2018 annual point-in-time census of the homeless to be disappointed, even dispirited.



To the contrary, they were positively upbeat. They got what they'd expected as they planned for the count late last year, what they'd been seeing on the streets and in shelters served by the 30 local governments, social service providers and advocates comprising the Continuum, giving them, The Inlander reported in January, "the sense that homelessness really is on the increase, both in Spokane and the rest of the Northwest. More homeless camps are popping up. More people are packing into shelters. Housing availability is at rock bottom levels."

Their count also covered more ground in 2018, stretching well beyond Spokane's city limits to "Cheney, Airway Heights, Spokane Valley, Mead, Deer Park," the City's David Lewis told The Inlander, "further than we ever have before," the more than 100 volunteers visiting some 170 sites across an almost 1,800 square-mile area. The bigger the area, the better the count, they believed, and the better the count, the more homeless likely to be counted.

Everybody Counts also had committed to higher-quality data, deciding to be one of the first Continuums in the county to equip its volunteers with an "app" – Simtech Solutions' Counting Us app – to collect information. Gone were the "pile of blue paper forms" that, in counts past, were manually, slowly and sometimes incompletely filled out, replaced by "smart phones" or tablets donated by the Wal-Mart Foundation. More questions could be asked, interviews could be completed more quickly and more people could be counted. And with a push of the "send" button, the information could be tabulated almost instantly and the analysis of the numbers behind the top-line number could begin almost as quickly.

And that data, not the top-line, was the data that mattered most to Everybody Counts, the numbers that could tell the Continuum who among the homeless were being served and who were not, which of its initiatives were hitting their targets and which were might be going awry. Which is why Everybody Counts was upbeat. "We saw," reported the City's Dawn Kinder at the April press conference, "a decrease in the number of veterans experiencing homelessness, a decrease in the number of young people experiencing homelessness, who are unaccompanied and alone on our streets. We also saw a decrease in chronically homeless individuals." All three results," she noted, were "areas where we really concentrated services in 2017." Better data, she added, will help Spokane "craft better solutions." These days, of course, "data" – especially that collected by social media companies – is becoming a bit of a dirty word. But without it we're clueless.

Ask business people for the secret to their success. "Knowing our customers," probably will top the list. The answer's in the data, data that tells them which products sell and which gather dust on shelves. Without data they'd be clueless. Ditto for the public sector. As Everybody Counts demonstrates, complete, timely and accurate data is critical in divvying up resources, designing the strategies and delivering the services we expect. Without it, government too would be clueless. Like it or not, if everybody – including the most vulnerable – matters, so too does data we need to serve them well.