

Advocates, leaders applaud progress on homeless crisis in OC, but urge new solutions for housing



Anthony Trejo of the Commission to Address Homelessness makes a point during a joint special meeting to discuss questions about the Point in Time Count in Santa Ana on Tuesday, July 21, 2026. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Orange County has made remarkable progress in improving homeless outreach and preventative services, but funding cuts and continued struggle to move people from shelters to permanent housing has reached a crisis point, county officials and housing advocates said during a post-mortem of the [2026 Point in Time Count](#). ✕

The OC Continuum of Care and the Commission to Address Homelessness held a special joint meeting Tuesday, July 21, with homeless services providers to discuss key takeaways from the biennial census of the county's homeless population now that there has been some time to digest the results since their May release.

The count reported [6,321 people](#) surveyed in January who said they were experiencing homelessness — a 14% drop from two years earlier — and found that, for the first time, the number of people staying in shelters exceeded those living on the streets.

"Many people think the Point in Time Count is a reflection on only the work done since the prior count," Doug Becht, the director of the county's Office of Care Coordination, said at the meeting. "But there are so many important decisions that happen years out" that end up impacting results.



READ MORE

The county's housing inventory has expanded significantly since 2016, Becht said, with overall bed capacity increasing by more than 4,000 units. The number of shelter beds, in particular, has tripled from just over 1,100 to 3,100; though the increase in permanent supportive housing has been more modest, from roughly 2,300 to 3,200 units.

Tim Shaw, a Continuum of Care board member, said the county has come a long way in increasing its emergency shelter and transitional housing stock, and those efforts are cause for celebration.

"I was around when we literally had no shelter infrastructure," he recalled. "If the armory wasn't open on a cold night, then done, you couldn't get in."

Yet, a persistent problem that has stumped efforts is the lag in construction of more permanent supportive housing to place people currently living in emergency shelter and transitional housing. The county's shelters are nearing capacity, which Becht said has created a bottleneck in its homeless services system.



0:04 / 0:15



do not interact. Individual steps
may vary. This is not a bank

The 2024 Point in Time Count found that 72% of the people living in county-run shelters were eligible for permanent housing, but only 1 in 12 was matched to a housing opportunity. Becht said the trends were similar this year.

“It’s a reflection on our housing stock and not on our shelters,” Becht said.

Benjamin Hurst, managing director at the [Salvation Army Orange County](#), [said the organization has built shelters](#) quickly and efficiently, but developing permanent supportive housing has been a “dangerously challenging” endeavor, as operational budgets are difficult to maintain.

“Homelessness is fundamentally a housing problem, he said. “We’ve got to get creative on what the shelter exit strategy is going to look like.”

Becks Heyhoe, executive director of [United to End Homelessness](#), said the increase in both shelter beds and bed utilization rates is “absolutely a win” for the county, as investments in the emergency shelter system seemed to have paid off.

“Perhaps the ongoing work of the commission and the Continuum of Care is to continue to look at how we can increase opportunities for housing, advocate for more funding to be allocated at a federal level for vouchers,” she said. “Is there room for philanthropy to get involved in rapid rehousing opportunities? That’d be a really great place for us to focus on together.”

Heyhoe also noted that a quarter of the people surveyed in the 2026 count said they fell into homelessness for the first time before the age of 24 — a statistic she said demonstrates “the devastation of young adults and children” affected by the housing crisis.

“This to me points out a need for potential investment into family resources and transitional youth resources, in order to see those numbers declining year after year,” she said.

Another challenge both officials and advocates are confronting is the drastic funding cuts at the state and federal levels. [Funding for emergency housing vouchers, for example, was set to last until 2030, but ended last year.](#) Becht said the county anticipates a significant drop in funding for permanent supportive housing projects over the next couple of years.

Shelby Feliciano-Sabala, the chief partnership officer at Project Hope Alliance, said it's important to focus on the root cause of homelessness, emphasizing that the No. 1 reason people become homeless is because of financial stress. To that end, several nonprofit leaders talked about the need to increase rental assistance as housing vouchers expire.

Veronica Kelly, director of the OC Health Care Agency, said the county also needs to invest more in support services for people suffering from substance abuse disorders, such as detox centers and Medi-Cal-accepted rehab programs.

Kelly noted that the county has increased bed capacity at residential treatment centers by 125%, or more than 100 beds. There are 88 additional beds "ready to come online" and help more people in recovery, she said, but cities need to step up to provide space for them.

"While we need more homes, we also need to ensure folks can maintain those homes," Kelly said. "We need everyone at the table to support the development of those services, or people will get houses and fall back into homelessness because we're not treating part of the reason they can't hold a job."

The Home Stretch: Our weekly newsletter breaks down the news on affordability, renting, buying, selling & more.

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms of Use](#), [Privacy Policy](#), and to receive emails from The Orange County Register.

MORE FROM OUR NEWSROOM



**Homeowners of color pay
higher insurance costs**