

# Executive Summary

The North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People presents this 2010 Report on Homelessness in North Dakota. The purpose of the report is to increase understanding about homelessness in our communities, and to advance efforts that will ultimately end the housing crisis that daily impacts more than 1100 homeless men, women, and children in North Dakota. Key findings are derived from a statewide point-in-time survey of homeless people that has been conducted annually for several years by trained surveyors, in accordance with HUD guidelines.

This study begins with a look at the demographics and characteristics of people who are literally homeless. The 2010 study identified 799 people in this category. The underlying causes of their homelessness include mental illness and other disabilities, chemical dependency, limited education and job training, and background issues such as credit and criminal history. External factors include a lack of affordable housing, a lack of housing assistance, limited employment opportunities and difficulty accessing transportation. The numbers of people who are literally homeless in North Dakota seem low when compared to other places. However, our shelters are continuously overcrowded, and service providers are finding it increasingly difficult to provide adequate levels of service. While the Coalition estimates that 7100 North Dakotans will experience homelessness at least once during 2010, homelessness is mostly hidden in our communities. Perhaps only shelter providers and the homeless people they serve fully understand that homelessness is a real fact of life in our communities.

In addition to the homeless in the shelter system, this study includes information gathered from 327 respondents who are precariously housed, without a permanent residence, temporarily doubled up with family or friends, or living in motels for as long as they can pay for a room. In this situation, they are in serious risk of being added to those who are in shelters or on the streets. This group identified themselves as homeless because they did not have a permanent home of their own. This is a side of homelessness that is quite common in our communities, but often ignored. It is almost impossible to get an accurate count of this group. It is particularly characteristic of homeless youth referred to as “couch surfers.” It is also characteristic of homelessness on North Dakota reservations. Most often, people in these circumstances do not receive the services they need to regain self-sufficiency.

The combined population of literally homeless and those who are precariously housed in unsustainable situations is 1126, up by 13% from 2009. This rate of increase is diminished from the rate of 18% from January 2008 to January 2009, indicating that, while we still have significant increases in the number of people experiencing homelessness, the rate of increase has slowed and efforts to mitigate homelessness are beginning to take hold.

Finally, the study analyzes North Dakota’s homeless population by region. The characteristics of the homeless population differ from one community to the next. For this reason this report provides information that pertains to eight separate regional areas.

While the state’s population has remained stable, and the underlying personal factors that contribute to homelessness have remained constant, we must identify other factors that have contributed to the sharp rise in homelessness over the past two years. Homelessness is on the rise throughout the nation and North Dakota, despite its relatively good economy, is no exception. The North Dakota Housing Finance Agency has identified a widening affordability gap that is difficult for low income, fixed income and special needs populations to contend with. North Dakota’s good economy has also been a draw to people who have come into the state from other areas of the country seeking employment opportunities and have not always been successful in securing housing and employment. Anecdotal evidence suggests this trend is on the wane and will likely reverse itself as other areas of the country experience economic recovery.

The North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People supports the 10-Year Plans to End Long Term Homelessness that exist throughout the state and urges stepped up implementation of the plans. Additionally, the Coalition urges the state to adopt a comprehensive housing policy that takes a balanced approach to the development of workforce, low income, special needs and affordable housing. In relation to homelessness, the policies should recognize that housing and not homeless shelters are the solution to homelessness and reflect a housing first philosophy, a commitment to removing institutional barriers between housing and supportive services, and a commitment to homelessness prevention.