

## NJCounts 2017

NEW JERSEY – All NJ counties participated in NJCounts 2017, a state-wide Point-In-Time Count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people, as mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Serving as the homeless hotline in four counties in the state (after-hours in Hudson and Morris counties and round-the-clock in Middlesex and Passaic counties), [NJ 2-1-1](#) took an active role in this count by counting every caller from anywhere in the state who identifies themselves as being homeless. Without the organization's involvement in this effort, some homeless people could go uncounted.

The count is performed every year in our state with the help of volunteers and agencies who are devoted to efforts to end homelessness. People involved in the count will tally the homeless populations in all of the shelters throughout the state, but will also take to the streets to be sure that those living outside of shelters are included.

"Everyone knows that the scarcity of affordable housing is an issue in our state," says Janice Kaniewski, NJ 2-1-1 call center director, "but it is sobering to hear the voices of those who are facing the prospect of immediate homelessness." In 2016, 27,068 people statewide called our office looking for help with a housing-related issue; over 20,000 of those calling were looking for shelter or emergency housing. An additional 185,000 searches occurred on the NJ 2-1-1 resource database last year using one of the following terms: Housing; Shelter; Homeless. Add these figures to the fact that over 83,000 in the same time period contacted the call center looking for financial assistance resources. "People are struggling," states NJ 2-1-1 board president, Gina Plotino. "There is just no denying that."

Monarch Housing Associates, the organization that is responsible for coordinating NJCounts 2017, identifies several factors that will contribute to this year's count of homeless families, youth and veterans, including:

Shelters reporting lack of capacity to house homeless families throughout 2016. (NJ state emergency assistance no longer reimburses shelters.)

A shortage of rental housing driving up demand and costs.

Failure by Congress to increase funding for the federal Housing Choice Voucher program hinders creation of affordable and supportive housing.

NJ's higher than national average rate of foreclosures (foreclosures cause many owners and renters to lose their homes).

The multitude of jobs in NJ that do not pay a living wage (and those jobs that do pay a living wage that are leaving the state).

When those in need of assistance dial 211, their call is answered by a compassionate call specialist who knows community resources. Every call begins with an inquiry of "How can I help you today?" and is followed by empathetic listening. "Our staff is trained to hear the needs expressed by our callers as well as to listen for other ways they can be of assistance," Kaniewski explains. "We have thousands of resources in our database and information on many assistance programs," she continues. "If a caller is not eligible for assistance in one area, they may be able to get help in another. Our call specialists know that and do all they can to connect callers with agencies and organizations that can provide critical resources."

The very same resource database that call specialists use is available to the public on the organization's website ([nj211.org](#)). Searches can be based on a need (like "shelter") or an agency's name, and results can be limited by county or zip code to find nearby resources. The site also offers topical resource pages that have been written to provide the public with information about programs and services in the state. A search for "affordable housing" results in a broad list of resource categories to choose from, including such topics as Housing/Shelter, Housing Counseling, Low Cost Home Rental Listings, Veteran Homes, Low Income Home Loans, and much more. To the right of that listing is a listing of related web pages and PDFs that often provides snap-shot information on federal, state and local programs, eligibility requirements, application links and contact numbers. Amongst the suggested pages for "affordable housing," is a page entitled Homeless in NJ ([nj211.org/homeless-in-new-jersey](#)) with specific information on how to find help.



“While it is true that many, many individuals and families are struggling in our state, they should know that they are not alone,” insists Plotino. “When they don’t know where to turn, I hope they will turn to us so that we can help them find the resources that may make a difference.” [NJ 2-1-1](#) is a free, confidential and multilingual statewide information and referral service that is open every day of the year - day or night.