

2026 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count

Volunteer Training



PIT Count Volunteer Training Agenda

PIT Count 101

- PIT Count: What, Who, and Why?
- FAQs

Your Role

- Introduction to surveys & interviews
- Where to go & who to interview
- Safety

Survey Practice

- Tips on surveying
- Group practice

Logistics

- What to bring, schedule of events, etc.
- Q&A: What questions do you have?

PIT Count 101

What is the PIT Count?

Who is counted in the PIT Count?

Why do we do a PIT Count?

Other FAQs

PIT Count 101

Your Role

Survey Practice

Logistics

What is the Point-in-Time (PIT) count?

- A literal count of all the people experiencing homelessness in our community on a single night (i.e., at a **point in time**)
- Conducted by every community nationwide in the last 10 days of January at least every other year
- A “snapshot” of homelessness on this one night in our community

Who is counted in the PIT count?

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) [definition of “homeless,”](#) for the purpose of the PIT count, includes two main types of homelessness:

- **Unsheltered:** Individuals or families whose primary nighttime residence is a public place not meant for human habitation
- **Sheltered:** Individuals or families residing in a place dedicated to serving people who would otherwise be unsheltered

Who is counted in the PIT count?



Sheltered PIT Count

- **Emergency shelters** (including those using hotel and motel vouchers)
- **Transitional housing**
- **Safe Havens**



Unsheltered PIT Count

- **Car**
- **Park**
- **Abandoned building**
- **Bus or train station**
- **Airport**
- **Camping ground**
- **Parking Lot**

Today's focus: Unsheltered PIT Count



Sheltered PIT Count

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- **Transitional housing**
- **Safe Havens**



Unsheltered PIT Count

- **Car**
- **Park**
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- **Camping ground**
- **Parking Lot**

Why do we do a PIT count?



To measure and monitor trends and changes in homelessness on local and national levels



To help our community understand what resources we need and strategize the best ways to use them to end homelessness



To comply with federal regulations and requirements

FAQ:

Why does the PIT count take place during the last 10 days in January?

- Same timeframe for every community ensures consistency across the U.S.
- Same timeframe year after year ensures that trends are monitored appropriately
- Set for a night in winter because then each CoC is likely maximizing its resources to serve people's needs. Thus, this timing can provide a more precise picture of who is unable to access emergency shelter or other crisis response assistance.
- End of the month to ensure that people who can only pay for temporary housing for part of the month are generally included in the count. For example, some people can afford to stay in a motel, but only for the first few weeks after receiving their public benefits payment at the beginning of the month

FAQ:

Why do we have to do the PIT count at night?

- The PIT count is a count of where people are sleeping **on the night designated for the count**. If we sent volunteers out *before* nighttime, we would not get the most accurate data for a few reasons.
 - There may be people who will sleep in unsheltered locations who are not yet out for the night.
 - We want to capture people's *actual* sleeping arrangement, not where they *plan* to sleep at a future time.
 - We don't want to only interview people who "look" the way many people assume those experiencing homelessness must look, which is hard to do during daylight hours.

FAQ:

How do we conduct an unsheltered PIT count?

- Brief interviews with people who might be experiencing homelessness using a survey form
 - Observation form if a survey or interview is not possible
- We'll get to the specifics of **what** information is collected and **how** to have conversations to collect it in the next few sections

Your Role in the PIT Count

Survey form introduction & how-to

Where to go

Who to survey or count

PIT Count 101

Your Role

Survey Practice

Logistics

Download the CountingUs App

Set up Key: HHA2026



Your Role

3 Possible Forms:

(All forms are on the Counting Us App)

Unsheltered Person Survey

For all people or households who are **willing and able to answer your survey questions.**

Observation Form

For any people or households who are **unwilling or unable to answer your survey questions.**

Sheltered Person Survey

For use by sheltering agencies (emergency, transitional, safe haven or non-congregate shelter)

Surveying Quick Tips

- Remember that you are speaking to highly vulnerable people and asking some very sensitive questions. Always lead with respect for the person you're speaking with and respect for their dignity.
- Everyone has the right to refuse to answer any or all of your questions.
- Ask all questions, unless the person has already given the answer to the question over the course of your conversation.
- Always ask questions as they are written; do not ask questions in a way that shows you think you already know the answer.
 - Example: Ask: "How do you identify your gender?" Do not ask: "You're male, right?"

Form #1: Unsheltered Person Survey

- Always start with this form (*we'll talk about special considerations for folks who don't want to or can't complete the survey with you for some reason*)
- Complete one survey form per household

Counting Us



Because Everyone Counts

Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting Interviews

Step 1: Approach & Introduction

- Approach the person and introduce yourself
- Ask if the person has a few minutes to answer some questions
- Keep in mind:
 - Individuals sleeping outside may be dealing with active addiction, mental health concerns, and significant trauma histories. Do not sneak up on or startle people. Never shine flashlights in people's faces.
 - Maintain eye contact (if possible) and an open stance with your hands visible. Use a tone of voice that's approachable. Speak slowly, be polite, and don't shout.



Hi, my name is [name]. We're out here trying to talk to folks who might not have a safe place to sleep tonight. Do you have a safe place to sleep tonight? Do you know where I might find some people around here who don't?

Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting Interviews

Step 2: Explain what you're doing & get consent

- Explain why you're there
- Offer any hygiene kits or other incentives at your discretion (available from HHA and other agency partners)
- If they consent to answering your questions, continue with the interview. If they don't, thank them for their time, and use the observation form.



We're conducting a survey, and your participation will help the community provide better services and resources for people who might not have a safe home to sleep at night. It'll take about 4-5 minutes, you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to answer, and it's all anonymous – meaning your name won't be used. Are you willing to answer these questions?

Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting Interviews

Step 3: Conduct the interview using the survey form

- Go through each question in the survey form.
 - Remember: people have the right not to answer all questions!
- Add any notes that may be helpful
 - Example: If a person says that they have their own apartment, but they're sitting on a bench outside of a 24-hour grocery store at 2:00 am with what appear to be all of their belongings, write down that you think there may be a discrepancy in what they are saying vs. where they will sleep that night.

Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting Interviews

Step 4: Closing the interview

- Thank the person for their time
- Refer them to any services or resources they may have asked about or may need.
- Direct clients to www.hhalliance.org or 211 for resources

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Because Everyone Counts

Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting Interviews

Step 5: Recording what you heard and observed

- Walk away from the person interviewed to a safe place
- Take a few minutes after your conversation to double check that you've completed the whole survey form
- Include any additional notes or details

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Form #2: Unsheltered Person Observation Tally

- Only use when unable to complete a survey with someone.
- Include as much detail as possible that helps to **make the person identifiable** and to provide clues on their **housing status**.

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Step-by-Step Guide to Observations

Step 1: Approach, Introduction & Consent

- Follow the same protocol you used with the interviews, and only use the observation form if the person says they don't want to answer your questions, or if they can't for some reason (e.g., if they're sleeping).

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Because Everyone Counts

Step-by-Step Guide to Observations

Step 2: Fill out the Observation Form

- Write down as much detail as possible that helps to **make the person identifiable** and to provide clues on their **housing status**.
 - What is the person **wearing**? (e.g., “Yankees baseball cap, navy GAP sweatshirt, jeans, and tan utility boots.” or “bundled in a grey, puffy sleeping bag that covered their face.”)
 - What does the person **look like**? (e.g., “shoulder-length grey hair, white, female, 50-60 years old”)
 - **Why** were you unable to complete a survey with them? (e.g., “They said they did not want to complete a survey, but they were awake.”)
 - **Where** did you see them? (e.g., “On 20th St. NW between R St. and S St., sitting on the bench outside of X store.”)
 - What makes you think that they are or may be **experiencing homelessness**? (e.g., “They were sleeping on a park bench with a large bag of their belongings next to them.”)

Form #3: Sheltered Person Survey

- For use by emergency/transitional/safe haven shelters
- Agencies providing non-congregate shelter should also include these individuals

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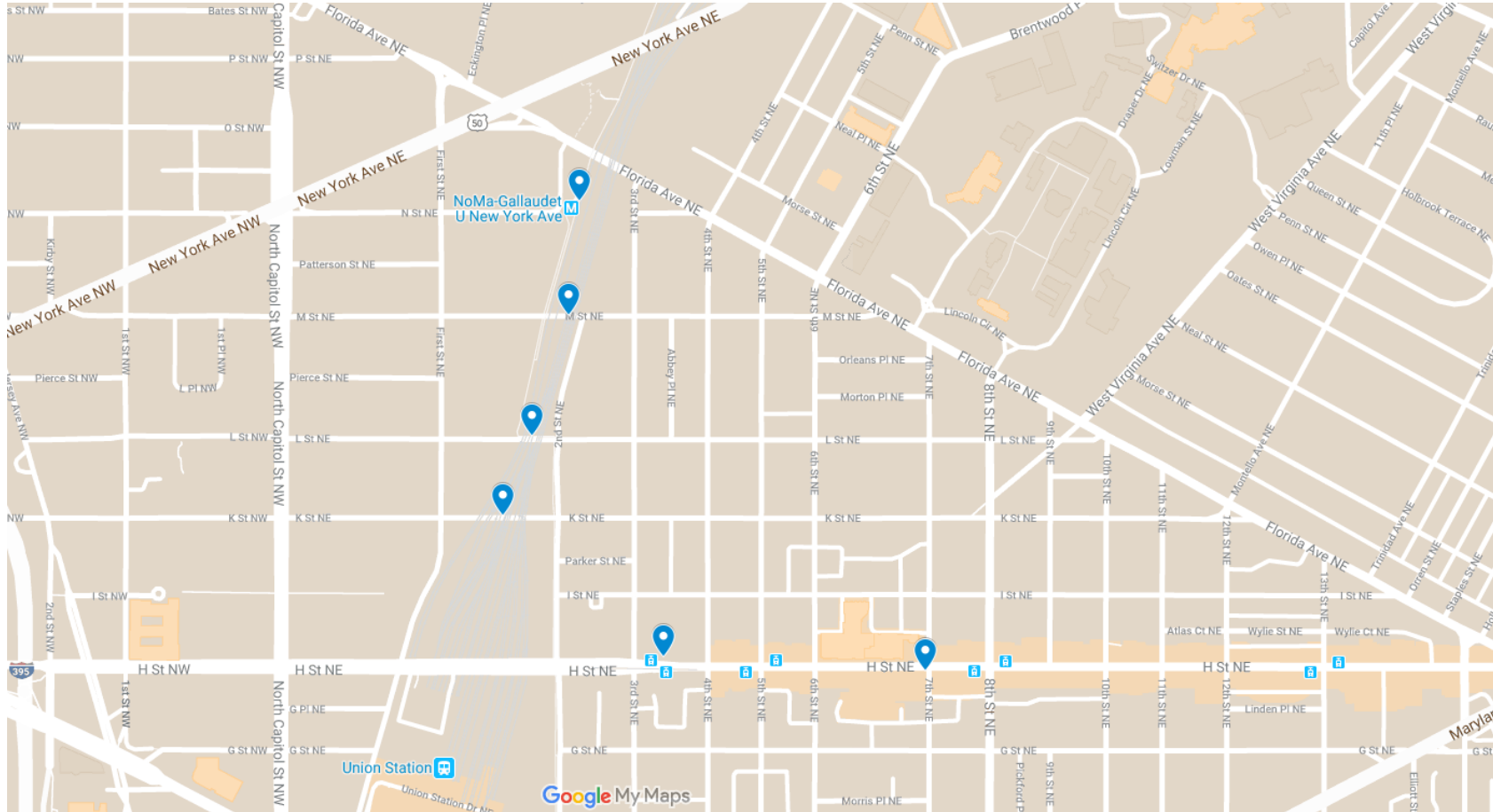


Because Everyone Counts

Where to go during the PIT Count

Your Role

HHA will provide each volunteer group with a designated area to screen



Where to go...

- Outdoor public places:
 - Parks
 - Public benches
 - Bus stops
 - Doorsteps of businesses that are closed for the night
 - Encampments
 - Parked cars
- Indoor places:
 - 24-hour businesses (e.g., grocery stores, McDonald's, Wal-Mart, convenience shops)
 - Bus, train, & metro stations
- Ask folks who you see out and about if there is anywhere else you should go
 - Employees at businesses that are open
 - Law enforcement (e.g., sheriffs and local police)
 - Others you interview

Who to interview...

- It is not always possible to determine if someone is experiencing homelessness based solely on how they look.
- Consider:
 - *Where do you see the person?*
 - *What is the person doing?*
 - *What time is it?*

Who to interview...

- **Pitfall:** Making assumptions about who to interview using stereotypes of what homelessness looks like.
- **Best practice:** Approach everyone you see. You can use a soft, non-confrontational introduction that's easy to reverse course if the person is not experiencing homelessness.



Hi, my name is [name]. We're out here trying to talk to folks who might not have a safe place to sleep tonight. Do you have a safe place to sleep tonight? Do you know where I might find some people around here who don't?

FAQ:

Should I wake someone who is sleeping?

- Do not wake anyone up who is sleeping.
- Use the observation-based form to fill out as much information about the person as you can observe.
- If someone appears to be sleeping in a dangerous situation immediately call 911.

Your Safety

- You should ALWAYS be with at least one other person.
- Keep an appropriate conversational distance from those you are interviewing.
- Maintain awareness of the space around you – where other people are, ways to get in or out of the space you're in, etc.
- Remain standing. It's okay to squat down to speak with someone who is sitting or lying on the ground, but always maintain your balance.
- Stay in places that are lit, including alleyways. If you use a flashlight, do so respectfully (i.e., don't shine it in anyone's face).
- Prioritize your own safety. If you don't feel safe approaching someone or going somewhere, don't go.
- Do not transport anyone other than volunteers in your personal vehicle
- In case of emergency, dial 911 and notify HHA

Safety of those you interview

- Health & safety concerns (especially if it's cold outside)
 - Notice if:
 - They have layers under and on them to keep them warm enough
 - They're dry (hypothermia concerns)
 - You can see the rise and fall of their breathing
 - Add your local protocol for what to do in your community if an individual is in distress, seeking immediate shelter, needs more layers, etc.
- ALWAYS call 911 if you are or someone else is at risk of danger

PIT Count Surveying & Interviewing Practice

Dos and don'ts

Practice going through the survey form interview
with partners and groups

PIT Count 101

Your Role

Survey Practice

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Surveying Quick Tips

- Remember that you are speaking to highly vulnerable people and asking some very sensitive questions. Always lead with respect for the person you're speaking with and their dignity.
- Everyone has the right to refuse to answer any or all your questions.
 - We'll talk later about how to record information about anyone who refuses to answer any or all questions.
- Ask all questions, unless the person has already volunteered the answer to the question over the course of your conversation.
- Always ask questions as they are written; do not embed assumptions into how you ask, even if you think you already know the answer.
 - Example: Ask: "How do you identify your gender?" Do not ask: "You're male, right?"

PIT Count Dos



DO get consent before asking PIT count survey questions



DO remember that you may be entering into someone's personal or private space



DO have a conversation with the people you interview



DO respect people's time

PIT Count Don'ts



DON'T take personal photos of or with the people you survey



DON'T ask questions in a way that assumes you know the answer



DON'T insert yourself into the person's story



DON'T force people to answer questions they don't want to answer



DON'T make promises you can't deliver

Any tips from volunteers who have participated the PIT count before?

Share your thoughts and experiences!

- What surprised you?
- What did you learn?
- What do you wish you had known before going out to survey people?

Survey Practice

Split up into partners, and practice:

- Introducing yourself
- Asking for the person's consent to participate in the interview
- Walking through the survey questions

Survey Practice Reflections

- How did it go?
 - What did you say to introduce yourself that seemed to work for you?
- What was easy or felt comfortable?
- What was challenging? What made you uncomfortable?
- What did you learn that you'll apply when you go out to conduct the PIT count?

Logistics

Night-of schedule

What to bring

Q&A: What questions do you have?

PIT Count 101

Your Role

Survey Practice

Logistics

Schedule on the day of the count

January 30, 2026

- HHA will create a list of volunteer groups based on registrations
- Group leads will coordinate a time and location to meet with team members
- Notify HHA when your team is ready to start counting
- HHA will identify a count area for your team and will be available for any question or concerns

Key Contacts

- Team members: Exchange cell phone numbers with others on your team in case you get lost or split into pairs and need to contact each other
- PIT count coordinator/lead agency
 - Okaloosa County – Kelli Hernandez: 850-409-3070 or 850-401-9555
 - Walton County – Dianne McMancus: 850-635-1092

What to bring

CoC will provide:

- CountingUs App –
 - download from the App Store or Google Play
- Hygiene kits and other incentives
- Snacks
- Flashlights as necessary
- Other requests: let us know!

You should bring:

- Your vehicle if you volunteered to drive
- Weather-appropriate clothing:
 - Warm, dry clothing
 - Light or bright colored / reflective clothing
 - Walking shoes – waterproof if possible
- Small backpack to carry census items and more clothing layers
 - Pack light – should be light and easy to carry, despite possible icy sidewalks / other rough terrain.
- Cell phone (fully charged); remote charger or backup battery.
 - Consider setting an emergency contact (ICE)
- Some form of ID
- Eat before you come; bring small snacks if you think it necessary
- Energy and compassion; a good set of eyes (visual observation is key)

Additional Opportunities to Get Involved

- Volunteer at area agencies
 - Handing out hygiene kits or supplies
 - Serving meals
 - Outreach services
- HHA has details for agencies accepting volunteers:
 - The Matrix COC, DeFuniak Springs
 - Caring and Sharing of South Walton
 - Catholic Charities, Fort Walton Beach
 - Crestview Area Shelter for the Homeless, Crestview

Additional Resources

- For more information about how the information collected during PIT counts is used and reported, visit the HUD Exchange webpage:
 - All [Annual Homeless Assessment Reports](#) (AHARs)
- For information about how PIT count methodologies are standardized nationwide, review the [*PIT Count Methodology Guide*](#)

Questions/Next Steps

- Download the CountingUs app
 - Setup Key: HHA2026
- Register on our website at:
<https://hhalliance.org/volunteer/>
- HHA will begin emailing teams and schedules tomorrow!

Thank you!