

**NCSHA 2010 Awards Entry Description****Entry Name:** *Development of a Statewide Homeless Count Methodology***Category Name:** *Special Initiatives***HFA:** *Georgia Department of Community Affairs/Georgia Housing and Finance Authority***Development of a Statewide Homeless Count Methodology  
Georgia Department of Community Affairs/Georgia Housing and Finance Authority****SUMMARY**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that every Homeless Continuum of Care conduct a point in time count of unsheltered and sheltered individuals and families at least once every other year. All communities report inherent challenges involved in their count methodology including the physical difficulties of locating unsheltered individuals, requirements of different approaches in urban versus rural areas, and limited training of data collectors and volunteers. No state or community had successfully utilized inferential statistics in order to arrive at an estimate of homelessness. In order to find an innovative way to improve statewide planning and meet federal requirements, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) partnered with statisticians at Kennesaw State University (KSU) to develop a valid statistical model which would provide the first statewide unsheltered homeless count in Georgia. The statistical model developed by KSU statisticians, paired with a service-based homeless count methodology, provides Georgia with a comprehensive count of unsheltered and precariously housed homeless individuals and families across the state. The count methodology and implementation increased Georgia's competitiveness for HUD Continuum of Care funding and improved DCA's ability to strategically appropriate resources in order to combat homelessness in Georgia.

**RESPONDING TO THE NEED**

The Georgia Balance of the State Continuum of Care, coordinated by DCA, covers 152 counties, many of them rural, presenting a significant challenge in conducting a point in time count of unsheltered individuals and families. While DCA was able to conduct a sheltered count, until 2008 it did not have a feasible way to comprehensively count unsheltered homeless people in the 152 counties. Many of the 152 counties are rural and have no formal homeless service providers. Further, rural homelessness is often hidden from view, either because those who are experiencing homelessness are staying night to night with friends and family, or because individuals without any shelter are in wooded areas or abandoned buildings away from roads and communities. Traditional street count methodologies in which volunteers go out on one night to physically count unsheltered individuals did not fit the circumstances in most of these communities. In addition, the lack of formal homeless assistance services made it even more difficult to organize locally or to obtain information about the number of unsheltered homeless in each county. Finally, there were extremely limited resources in terms of funding and staff, available at the state level to conduct a count across 152 counties. The remaining six Continuums of Care in Georgia (which cover more urban areas) each employ unique count methodologies, further increasing the difficulty to arrive at a statewide count of homelessness. However, it was extremely important to provide an accurate statewide estimate of unsheltered and precariously housed individuals and families in order to satisfy the HUD count requirement and to improve DCA's ability to strategically allocate resources and develop a statewide plan. Unfortunately, DCA was not able to find any existing statistical or methodological models that would enable such a count. In order to develop an innovative way to provide statewide statistics on homelessness, DCA partnered with statisticians at Kennesaw State University (KSU).

**THE INNOVATION**

Because no current statistically valid models for estimating the number of homeless families and individuals existed, DCA partnered with KSU to develop a multi-step inferential statistics approach to the

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statewide homeless count which involved cluster analysis, stratified sampling, and multiple regression analysis. The first part of the methodology was the grouping of counties into clusters so that a sampling methodology could be used. In order to identify the required sample county sizes and locations, KSU employed a statistical methodology called a cluster analysis. This methodology enabled DCA to group different counties across Georgia, based on key demographic and economic characteristics such as poverty, education levels, and percentage of owner occupied housing units. KSU used demographic and economic data from a variety of sources to test and refine the analysis until they arrived at 9 clusters of counties. The narrowing down of the counties to 9 clusters allowed for the use of stratified sampling where sample counties in each cluster were identified in order to ensure the required sample sizes were met.

The second component was the development and implementation of the survey methodology in each of the sample counties. Because the majority of the 152 counties in the Balance of State were rural, a service count methodology was selected. The service count methodology was adapted from several other states that had utilized the methodology in rural communities. A two page survey was developed which collects minimal identifying information (for de-duplication purposes) as well as demographic, household, and special needs data. The survey also asks the respondent where they spent the night on the date of the point in time count. Utilizing the survey methodology allowed counties to collect surveys over the span of a week, rather than having to count only on one night. This methodology also allowed participating counties to count at different types of locations such as food pantries and social service agencies and to prevent the limited service hours of some survey locations from impeding the data collection efforts. The use of the survey also allowed counties to collect information both on literally unsheltered individuals and families (by HUD's definition) and individuals and families that were precariously housed. Recruited counties received training from DCA regarding survey collection, volunteer recruitment and training, and overall count coordination. Once all surveys were collected, they were sent to KSU for data entry, cleaning, and analysis in order to arrive at the point in time counts for all sample counties. Once a reliable count was available for the samples in each cluster, the proportion of homeless in those counties was applied to the rest of the counties in the cluster.

The final and third component of the methodology was a regression analysis. Regression attempts to fit a model to observed data in order to quantify the relationship between two groups of variables. The model may then be used either to merely describe the relationship between the groups of variables, or to predict new values. The multiple regression analysis allowed KSU to predict the proportion of homelessness in each county. Using the initial estimates of homelessness (based on the counts in the sample counties) as the dependent variable, multiple regression models were developed using a combination of demographic and economic variables. Using these variables, the prediction of the proportion of homeless by county was made. These ratios were then applied against the population values to generate a prediction of homelessness in each county.

The benefit of this model was that it was able to incorporate the homeless counts conducted in the other six Continuums of Care despite their use of different homeless count methodologies. Therefore, the approach allowed each Continuum to utilize the most appropriate count methodology for their Continuum while still allowing for the development of a statewide estimate of homelessness. In 2008, the methodology took the unsheltered homeless count in 23 counties to provide an actual or predicted count of unsheltered homeless persons by county for all 159 of Georgia's counties. The methodology was utilized again in 2009, after some refinement of the model based on experience from 2008 and adjustment for updated demographic data. In 2009, the data used for the model came from survey counts conducted in 24 counties in the Balance of State as well as street count numbers from five other Continuums of Care. DCA will utilize this same count methodology in the next statewide homeless count in January 2011.

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The benefits that will result from this innovative count methodology clearly outweigh the cost. The resources required to conduct the count are minimal considering the outcome. The majority of the resources required were the cost of KSU to develop the model, enter the data and do the statistical analysis and to pay a count coordinator at the state level. Minimal funding was also used to provide sample counties with a small stipend for supplies as well. However, this total cost of \$60,000 for initial model development and \$50,000 per year to conduct the count is minimal when compared to the benefits to the state including eligibility for funding, improved state and local planning, and strategic allocation of resources. DCA has submitted homeless count data to HUD in two Balance of the State Continuum of Care applications which have scored high enough in the national competition to be awarded new projects. The Balance of State Continuum of Care brings in more than 11 million dollars each year including over 3 million in new projects. These new projects may not have been funded without the count data which was included in the application, meaning that each dollar spent on the count was able to bring in over 60 dollars in new funding to the continuum. In addition, the methodology employed saved the state of Georgia thousands of dollars when considering the amount of resources that would be required to conduct an actual homeless count in all 159 counties. The count has also provided DCA with extremely valuable data which has been used for resource allocation, strategic planning and collaboration with other state agencies. DCA has been able to publish two reports presenting the count data combined with other sources of data on homelessness in Georgia which have allowed us to raise awareness and provide information on need. We have numerous requests for county specific count information from local providers and local government for use in grant applications, consolidated planning, and local comprehensive planning. The innovative methodology has helped to raise local awareness in rural communities that never realized that there was a homelessness issue in their community. The count data also provides DCA with information to guide how federal and state funds are allocated in Georgia. Currently, there are not enough beds to house the number of homeless in Georgia. However, the 2009 reports helped to highlight the fact that a great deal of this need is actually in the suburban and rural areas of Georgia rather than in the state's most urban communities. This has allowed DCA, through the State Interagency Council and partnerships with nonprofits across the state to develop approaches that ensure all of Georgia's counties have access to homeless assistance. For example, DCA employed a regional approach with the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act funding for Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing (HPRP) to ensure that all of the counties not receiving local HPRP funds had access to services. Georgia's innovative homeless count methodology serves as a key tool in understanding the magnitude and scope of the homeless problem in Georgia.

**SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS**

2008 and 2009 DCA Homeless Count Reports

2008 and 2009 Count Methodology Reports from Kennesaw State University