# Case Study: Communications and Point-in-Count data and By-Name Data

*Metro Denver and San Diego employ communications to shape understanding of homelessness within their communities*

## Background

The release of any community's Point-in-Time Count is likely to dominate a region's news coverage and set narratives of whether a community is making progress on solving homelessness. The incomplete story that is often told by journalists, influential local stakeholders, and constituents can often generate significant attention, but often in a way that does not support a community's progress.

It is critical for local leaders to maintain the public's confidence that they understand the problem, that there are bright spots, and to be clear on where support can accelerate and overcome local challenges. Without public confidence in the community's leaders, and possibility of progress:

- Community leaders lose will for the support they need to reduce and end homelessness
- Demand rises for immediate action to address the visible presence of homelessness, rather than investment in the permanent, humane, and effective solutions
- Political leaders succumb to pressures from the public, often reaching for immediate action that may not support, or even undermine, the solutions that are needed

On the other hand, when local narratives are grounded in a true understanding of the state of homelessness, the challenges alongside the solvability of the problem, and a sense of progress, they can generate the political patience and support needed to sustain a systems approach to reducing and ending homelessness.

The Point-in-Time count release is a critical moment to not just mitigate against the harms of an incomplete or inaccurate narrative that undermines local efforts, but to affirmatively advance understanding and a clear narrative that supports their ability to solve the problem.

We also recognize that, in addition to a Point-in-Time Count specific strategy, there is a system of regular communication to key stakeholders about the state of homelessness that can ensure the narrative locally is complete, actionable, and contextualized.

# Metro Denver Case Study

The Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) was recently working to manage the release of their Point-in-Time count number, which reflected increases in homelessness. It felt critical that they could take hold of the narrative. Their objectives were to:

- Be seen as the go-to source for homelessness in Metro Denver
- Contextualize the Point-in-Time Count, reflecting what it tells us and what it does not
- Highlight a more comprehensive, accurate, and up to date understanding on the state of homelessness
- Amplify proof that the community is making progress in many regards
- Articulate challenges and solutions that would help the community overcome them

As we reflect on these coordinated efforts, we are measuring success by:

- % of media stories that engaged local system leaders to shape the local story
- # of stories that amplify proof of progress, within broader stories about challenges and increases
- # of stories that create space for solutions that would help the community make more progress
- # of stories that accurately convey the degree to with the Point-in-Time count can represent the *current and whole* picture of homelessness within the community

## Key Messaging

- The Point-in-Time is a snapshot of homelessness on a single night with numerous variables such as weather, count participation, volunteer engagement, and a variety of other factors. While this count can help us understand homelessness on a single night, getting to a place where we have comprehensive, real-time data regionally is the ultimate goal.
- The region has made significant strides in decreasing its reliance on the one-night count. Instead, providers, municipalities, and others are working together to improve participation with the region's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to make data accessible each day on those experiencing homelessness. Outreach teams across the seven-county metro-Denver region increased HMIS usage in 2022 to help create a more real-time understanding of those staying outdoors as well as assist in connecting clients to services and housing.
- While the world is no longer in a pandemic, we are beginning to feel the full economic fallout of the COVID-19 era. With COVID-19 relief funds for the prevention

of homelessness coming to an end, as well as many other COVID-era protections, we've seen a sharp increase in the number of eviction filings as more households struggle to pay rent. This, paired with inflation and the increased cost of housing, is resulting in many people falling into homelessness and many being unable to obtain housing.

- Despite overall increases, we are confident that homelessness is solvable. Communities that have successfully ended homelessness have done so one subpopulation at a time. Starting with Veterans, Metro Denver is proving that we can drive measurable reductions in homelessness. PIT data shows the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness decreased by 34% from 2020 to 2023, a reduction rate of three times the national average.

## Spokesperson

- Dr. Jamie Rife, Executive Director at the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative

## Media Outreach and Engagement

- Media education on the Point in Time Count, By-Name Data, and what both can tell us and what it cannot
- Released a press release with key messages
- Targeted reporters who cover homelessness in Denver with proactive messaging on the PIT results and offered to do interviews
- Tied in the PIT results with other timely news (the newly elected Mayor's emergency declaration for homelessness)

## Results

- Colorado Public Radio- Homelessness continues to rise in metro Denver. Here are 5 solutions, according to an expert
- Colorado Public Radio- Colorado Matters- Aug. 4, 2023: Five ways to help end homelessness;
- 9 News- 'My takeaway is: We see it' | Homelessness rises in metro counties outside Denver
- The Colorado Sun- Denver's homeless population grew 31.7% in one year, annual survey finds

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# A Strategy for the Point-in-Time Count

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- Create a proactive media plan to help control the narrative
  - Write localized key messaged that:
    - Highlight the communities progress on solving homelessness (examples: population-level reductions, sustaining functional zero, achieving real-time, by-name data, joining Built for Zero, etc.)
    - Provide broader context about local challenges and contributing factors for any PIT population-level increases
    - Outline the solutions that would help the community make more progress
    - Explain the degree to with the Point-in-Time count can represent the *current and whole* picture of homelessness within the community
  - Identify and equip community-wide spokespeople with key messages
    - Reporters will often want more than one source for their story. Have a main spokesperson for the results, but work with your homelessness response team to see who else can do interviews and would reinforce the key messages.
    - [Here is an example of a reporter brief and talking points document](#)
    - [Here are media tips and best practices](#)
  - Write a press release with the results contextualized alongside the key messages identified in step one
  - Create a targeted media contact list with reporters who have worked with your organization before and/or cover homelessness in your community.
  - Send individualized email media pitches to the reporters. Strong media pitches include:
    - Personal intro that shows you have done your research on that reporter and outlet
    - Succinct pitch with story details
    - Who is available for interviews
    - Specific ask to cover the story
    [Here is an example media pitch on the PIT results.](#)
  - Distribute the press release through the organization's owned channels (social media, website, a newsletter, etc.)
- Have a protocol for responding to inbound media requests. In addition to having an affirmative media plan, it's important to have policies and protocols in place for how to engage with the media when they reach out to staff for interview requests on their own.
  - [You can view an example media protocol plan here.](#)

# San Diego's Data Communications Strategy

San Diego has [modeled a way](#) to develop a consistent communications strategy that is aimed at educating key stakeholders to understand the state of homelessness in their community throughout the year to shape local discourse in a nuanced, productive way .

The key elements of their strategy include:

- Maintaining a public data dashboard
- Developing a [monthly data report](#) that demonstrates the dynamic nature of homelessness and provides analysis and helps to make meaning of trends
- Employing a targeted dissemination strategy that reaches key stakeholders, which includes but is not limited to journalists, elected officials, and CoC and nonprofit boards across platforms (social and traditional media).
- Further influencing local narrative by issuing a monthly press release for news outlets to be alerted to the report

Since the launch, the tone of local media reports on homelessness has noticeably shifted, with an increased spotlight on outcomes and solutions and a recognition of the immense work being done and the support needed. Key stakeholders have harnessed the data within the reports to frame and shape local perception on the state of homelessness.

If you have specific questions about this document, please contact Lauren Barnes-Carrejo at lbarnes@community.solutions.

You can also  find more communications resources developed by Built for Zero for participating communities at
[https://login.builtforzero.org/hubs/communications-hub/](https://login.builtforzero.org/hubs/communications-hub/)