



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES

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VULNERABLE POPULATIONS EXPERIENCING INCREASED HOMELESSNESS

2024 Point-In-Time Count Reveals Plight of Older and Disabled Adults

The final [full report](#) for the 2024 Point-In-Time (PIT) Count [released](#) on July 19, revealed that even though Santa Cruz County was able to maintain progress from the 2023 PIT Count in reducing the impacts of homelessness on individuals and the community, two particularly vulnerable populations have seen increases—older and disabled adults. While the overall number of people experiencing homelessness increased only slightly, by 2.6% from 2023 to 2024, there was a 7% increase in homelessness among seniors aged 55 and over, mirroring national and statewide trends. More notably, the number of people with disabilities experiencing a year or more of homelessness in Santa Cruz County increased 19% from 573 to 710 in 2024.

According to a [recent report](#) by the University of California at San Francisco's Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, the proportion of adults age 50 and older who are experiencing homelessness in California has risen faster than any other age group in the past few decades. The proportion of people over the age of 65 experiencing homelessness is expected to triple between 2017 and 2030. These populations often live on fixed incomes that are insufficient to cover California's skyrocketing housing costs and waitlists for housing vouchers can take years before a housing subsidy becomes available.

For Santa Cruz County—the unincorporated areas as well as the county's four cities—the impact is likely more acute. On June 28, the National Low Income Housing Coalition released its annual [Out of Reach](#) report for 2024, showing that Santa Cruz County continues to be the most expensive metropolitan county in the country to live in based on average 2-bedroom market rate rental costs, with the gap increasing to 20 percent above the next most expensive county.

"Increased housing insecurity is a symptom of—and will exacerbate—other issues older and disabled adults face, especially when on a fixed income," states Alicia Morales, County Human Services Department (HSD) Adult and Long Term Care Division Director. "And these disparities often grow at a faster rate for seniors because of growing health care access and caregivers needs, increased isolation, transportation challenges, less digital access and greater economic challenges for people over the age of 60."

The number of adults aged 65 and older receiving In-Home Support Services (IHSS) through HSD in the past year is up by 16 percent to 1,942, from just 4 years prior. Rates of food insecurity for adults aged 65 and older in the county are also on the rise, up 4 percent in the past year to over 5,100 people, from 4 years ago when just over 3,100 of Santa Cruz County older adults in this age bracket received CalFresh, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP.

Not only are there clear signs that disparities among older adults are increasing, but the population of older adults itself is increasing. It is estimated that older adults ages 60 and up in Santa Cruz County will reach 30% of the total county population by 2030, exceeding California's estimate for state-wide percentages in this same period. As of 2022, adults ages 60 and older in Santa Cruz County were just 24 percent of the total population, according to the US Census.

"As we continue to grapple with funding challenges for addressing homelessness and the increasing unaffordability of Santa Cruz County in general, older and disabled adults are increasingly disproportionately impacted," says County HSD Housing for Health Division Director Robert Ratner "The population of older adults in Santa Cruz County is itself increasing, and with it, I fear, so will the disparities. However, proposed California [Senate Bill 37](#), the Older and Disabled Adults Housing Stability Act of 2024, could help address these growing disparities by creating a statewide housing subsidy pilot program for older and disabled adult populations."

Recent state policies, such as Governor Newsom's 2020 Master Plan for Aging (MPA) legislation, aim to address the growing disparities older and disabled adults face. "Too often, as well intended as these policies are, the reality is that Counties only receive one-time, sometimes competitively awarded state or federal funding for the local programs established to implement state and federal policies," says Morales. "Our programs are not sustainable when their funding goes away, which sets us back in our ability locally to best serve the older and disabled adults in our community."

This past spring, the County completed a community needs assessment survey as part of its "Age Well Santa Cruz County" initiative, the County's local Master Plan for Aging implementation. Results of the survey are expected to be released in August, and it is anticipated it will provide a first window into current needs that will inform how we can improve housing stability for older and disabled adults in Santa Cruz County, as well as how we meet the other challenges older and disabled adults face locally. "Age Well Santa Cruz County will be our blueprint for implementing strategies and partnerships that promote healthy aging for all," says Morales, who is mindful that these strategies effect residents of all ages and abilities, not just seniors and those with disabilities. "All of us are better off from policies and programs meant to improve how we age in place in our communities—from adult kids providing care at home for a parent, to young adults struggling to set aside future savings that help them remain housed and able to put food on the table as they age."

About the Human Services Department

The Human Services Department strengthen our community by protecting the vulnerable, promoting self-sufficiency, alleviating poverty, and improving the quality of life, through a wide range of safety net services to meet the basic needs of individuals and families in Santa Cruz County. Learn more at: <https://www.santacruzhumanservices.org>

PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE ♦ PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY ♦ ALLEVIATING POVERTY

STRENGTHENING OUR COMMUNITY BY IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF ALL COUNTY RESIDENTS