

PALM BEACH COUNTY

Solutions to assist homeless growing

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Park rangers trek out at night to patrol certain Palm Beach County parks — looking not for chances to apprehend homeless people, but to help them.

County officials are working to assist the homeless, whose reported population has significantly increased in recent years. They're also tackling housing-affordability problems head on.

The county is among the numerous communities across Florida seeking out more solutions. Now in effect is a new state law that bans overnight sleeping in public places and lets the public sue local governments if the rules aren't adequately enforced.

In addition to the overnight park rangers, Palm Beach County officials also have identified plots of land in the county that could be designated for affordable housing. And from the 27 affordable housing projects currently underway, more than 2,100 units will result from them.

County officials define an unsheltered person as anyone who lives in a place not meant for permanent habitation, such as an abandoned building, a car or a campsite.

The population has gone up: In 2019, just under 1,400 people reportedly were considered unsheltered. In 2024, that increased to 2,126, according to a point-in-time count.

With “the unsheltered residents, we had two goals,” said Wendy Tippet, the county's Human Services and Community Action co-chair during a public meeting

on Tuesday. “One was to reduce homelessness for unsheltered residents in our community. And the second is to increase access to support services for unsheltered residents and to prevent unsheltered living to those at risk.”

What has the county done so far?

The new state law, HB 1365, bans people from sleeping in public spaces such as parks, bus stops, on the beach and on sidewalks. In response, county officials added 11 overnight parking rangers to patrol “hot spots” across county parks.

According to county documents: “Palm Beach County has adopted a stance against addressing unsheltered living through punitive measures, recognizing that arrests and criminalization are not effective approaches.”

Thus, the park rangers are not meant to get anyone in trouble; rather, resources, shelter and other social service needs are provided.

“The partnership with parks is essential not only to address House Bill 1365 but also to ensure that parks remain safe and welcoming for everyone,” Tippet said during Tuesday’s meeting.

And through collaborations with different shelters, 1,300 households containing more than 1,800 people were helped in 2024. More resources have become available recently, too, such as the 74 beds at the Central County Housing Resource Center.

As for the 27 projects under development, those will result in a total of 2,187 new affordable housing units. Some examples of these projects include:

Madison Terrace in Lake Worth Beach, with 91 units.

One North Lake in Pahokee, with 54 units.

Coleman Park Renaissance in West Palm Beach, with 43 units.

“At the end of the day we need affordable housing, I just can’t say that loud enough,” Tippet said.

What does the county have planned for the future?

Because finding available land tends to be one of the greatest obstacles in building new housing of any kind, least of all affordable, the county has identified a few different lots in the county that are being considered for affordable homes.

In Riviera Beach, 50 infill lots — or empty land within a preexisting urban or suburban area — will be used to create affordable homes, and a 22-home subdivision also is planned for the city.

In West Boynton, a parcel of land is being considered for at least 59 multifamily homes, and along Okeechobee Boulevard, a mixed development with possible senior housing could rise.

Much of this work has been conducted by the county's Housing and Economic department.

“We work toward the common goal of increasing the ability of those who work within Palm Beach County to afford to live in Palm Beach County,” said Carlos Serrano, the department's director of strategic planning and operations, during Tuesday's meeting.

According to the county's housing dashboard, there are currently 6,382 total affordable housing units in 74 projects. Nearly 3,000 are either under construction or in the pre-development project status phase.

“We've got a lot of work to do. I'm ready to dive in. I think the rest of the board is ready to dive in,” County Commissioner Bobby Powell Jr. said during the meeting. “The way we change people's lives is homeownership opportunities.”