

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

How many homeless people are there in the Shoals?

An annual count of homeless people is conducted by the Homeless Care Council of Northwest Alabama (HCCNWA), which serves Lauderdale, Colbert, Franklin, Marion, Lawrence and Winston Counties. This yearly count is done in these 6 counties in January of each year, over a 48-hour period. This count is completed by going out and finding any homeless person willing to fill out a survey during the 48-hour period. These numbers also take into consideration people who are “couch surfing” – meaning they do not have a permanent residence, but bounce from location to location, staying in different places. This also takes into consideration people who are staying in emergency domestic violence shelters, short term “halfway” houses and those in recovery programs who identify as homeless.

- In 2018, 256 homeless persons were identified.
- In 2017, 155 homeless persons were identified. **This count is lower due to not having a HCCNWA Director during the count.*
- In 2016, 337 homeless persons were identified.

Why does it seem like the number of homeless people has increased lately?

One of the main reasons that the number of homeless persons has increased is that there are a larger number of people affected by the opioid crisis and there are very limited services for recovery in this area. The second reason is that many of the local “visible” homeless persons struggle with mental illness. Because the Shoals has one of the only mental illness programs (Riverbend) within a 2-hour radius, many people come here for treatment and then once they can no longer receive services, find themselves homeless. Many of these people are incapable of maintaining employment and independent housing.

Are homeless people coming from all over the country to Florence?

This is a common myth that gets repeated often. Of the 527 guests that Room in the Inn has hosted since 2014, 89% of them have been from Lauderdale and Colbert Counties. Based on conversations with the local homeless population, this isn't happening. Of the 130 people who eat at Room at the Table, less than 10% are homeless. There is not a bus or van from Huntsville bringing homeless people each night to eat at Room at the Table.

I see a van dropping people off every day at the park. Does this mean that homeless people are coming from Huntsville or outside of the Shoals?

The daily drop-off that is seen in the park is because there is a day center for homeless people located in Sheffield. They provide a daily pick-up and drop-off due to the difficulties of walking across the bridge. Sometimes during the winter, Room in the Inn provides a pick-up in the downtown area for guests that have mobility issues.

Why don't homeless people just get jobs?

There are a number of reasons that homeless people can't just go out and “get a job”. The biggest barrier for homeless people to get employed/stay employed is a lack of public transportation. Even when they secure a job, they don't have a way to get to work every day and they often lose their job because of this. Another reason is a lack of proper identification (most employers require a valid social security card and state ID. Many homeless people have no documentation to get these needed pieces of identification, often times because all of their belongings have been stolen repeatedly.) Other reasons include lack of access to regular showers and hygiene, lack of access to a phone/internet which employers require and no money to purchase the required uniform items often needed for minimum wage jobs.

What are the shelter options for Homeless People?

The Salvation Army and Room in the Inn are the only two homeless shelters in a six-county area. The Salvation Army has a 60-bed capacity and only allows their clients to stay 30 days out of each calendar year. They are a national, faith-based program. Room in the Inn is open as a winter homeless shelter and operates from November through March each year.