

The 2001 Virginia Rural Homeless Survey

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Background and Approach

During the month of February 2001, the Virginia Tech Center for Housing Research and participating social service providers joined forces to count the rural homeless population in Virginia. The Virginia Housing Study Commission, the Virginia Interagency Action Council (VIACH) for the Homeless, and the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (VDHCD) commissioned the Virginia Survey of Rural Homeless in response to House Joint Resolution 257 requesting a study of the number and needs of homeless people living in rural areas of the Commonwealth.

Representatives of the Housing Study Commission, VIACH, VDHCD, and the Center formed a Steering Committee for the survey. The Steering Committee defined “rural” as the nonmetropolitan jurisdictions of Virginia (as established by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget in 1998). Non-metropolitan jurisdictions were further categorized into four regions: Southwest, Shenandoah, Southside, and Northern Neck/Eastern Shore (Map 1).

The definition of homeless employed in the study was based on federal standards. A person was considered homeless only when it could be documented that he/she resides in one of the following places, or is in a situation as described below:

- In places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings (on the street).
- In an emergency shelter.
- In transitional or supportive housing for homeless persons who originally came from the streets or emergency shelters.
- In any of the above places but is spending a short time (up to 30 consecutive days) in a hospital or other institution.
- Is being evicted within a week from a private dwelling unit and no subsequent residence has been identified and the person lacks the resources and support networks needed to obtain housing.
- Is being discharged within a week from an institution, such as a mental health or substance abuse treatment facility or a jail/prison, in which the person has been a resident for more than 30 consecutive days and no subsequent residence has been identified and the person lacks the resources and support networks needed to obtain housing.
- Is fleeing a domestic violence housing situation and no subsequent residence has been identified and the person lacks the resources and support networks needed to obtain housing.
- If discharged from a prison or jail and no subsequent residence have been identified and the person lacks the resources and support networks needed to obtain housing.
- Living with relatives or friends and staying at one place for more than a few days at a time (Doubled-up).

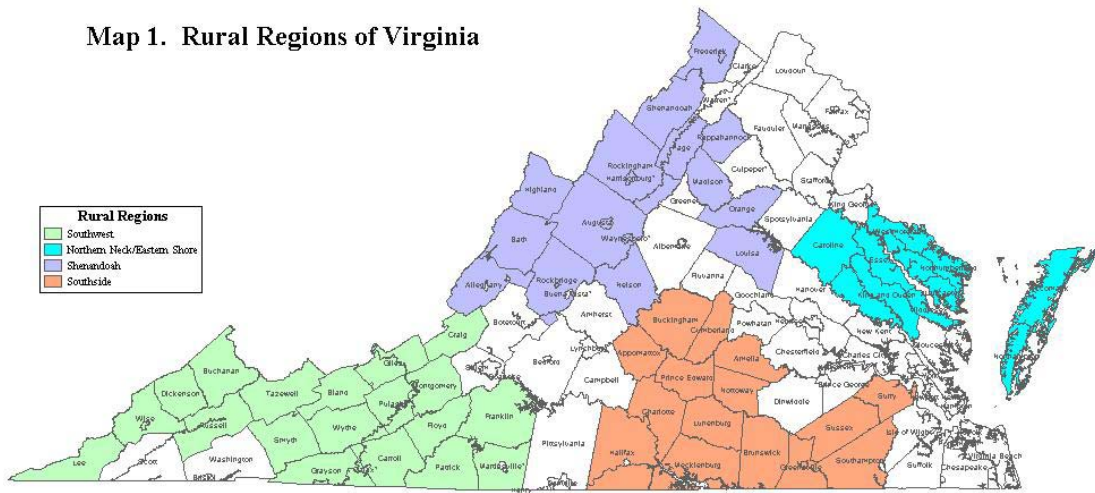
People were not homeless if they were:

- In housing, even though the housing is substandard, in need of repair, crowded, or expensive.
- Currently incarcerated.
- Living in a Board and Care, Adult Congregate Living Facility, or similar place.
- Being discharged from an institution that is required to provide or arrange housing upon release.
- Wards of the State, although youth in foster care may receive needed supportive services which supplements, but does not substitute for, the state's assistance.
- Living in "doubled-up" circumstances by choice in order to save money.

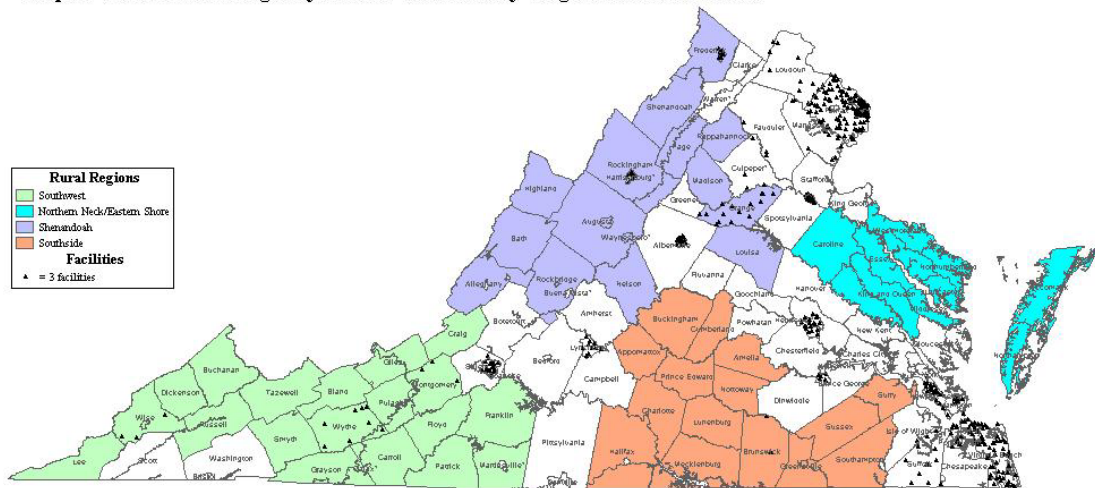
One of the first tasks of the Steering Committee was to review the distribution of shelters throughout Virginia. Maps 2-5 provide, respectively, the distribution of full emergency shelter facilities; emergency shelter/domestic violence facilities; transitional housing facilities; and, winter and day shelter facilities. It is quite clear from these maps that homeless shelters are heavily clustered in urban areas, with the exception of domestic violence shelters, which are somewhat more widely available. The few shelters that exist in non-metropolitan areas tend to be in urban places, such as Winchester and Staunton.

It was additionally obvious that a "shelter count" of rural homeless would be biased by the lack of shelters and would not provide a reliable estimate of rural homeless. Consequently, the Committee decided to survey all social service providers in rural Virginia who could have contact with the homeless. The survey included all departments of social services, community service boards, community action agencies, homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters, Salvation Army centers, and Legal Aid offices. In addition, every county sheriff's office was included, as were any churches or nonprofit organizations that were identified as providing services to the poor. Sheriffs' offices were included as these occasionally have contact with the homeless when service providers are unavailable.

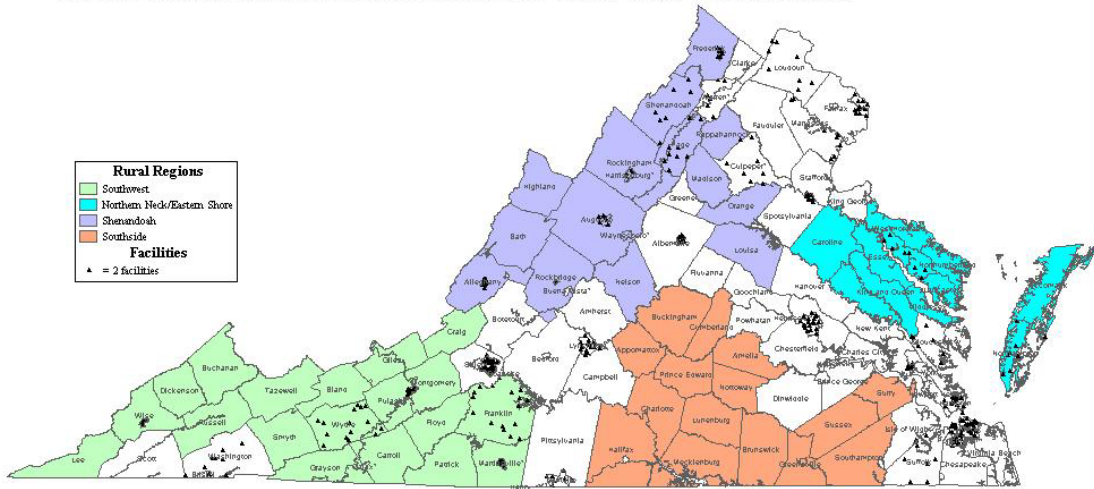
Map 1. Rural Regions of Virginia



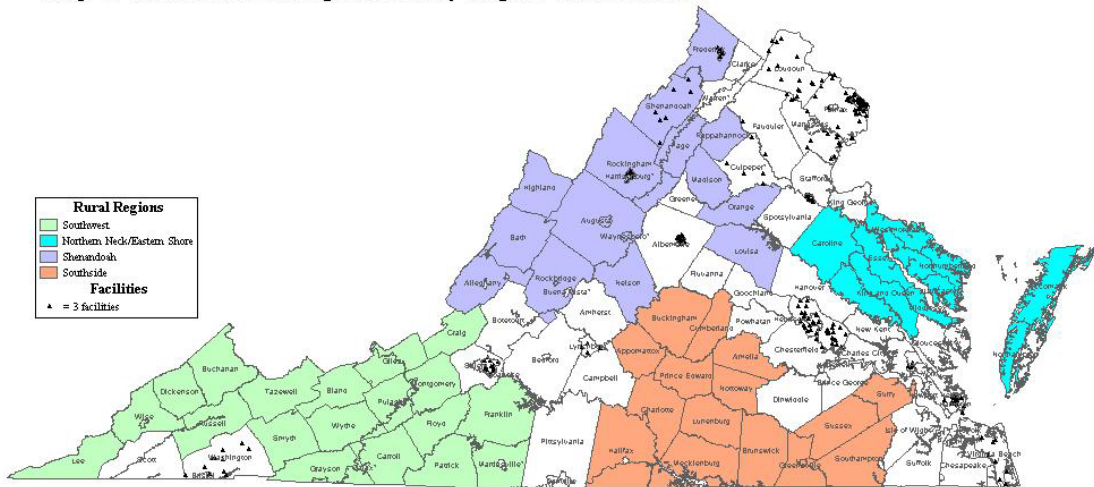
Map 2. Full Year Emergency Shelter Facilities by Virginia Cities/Counties



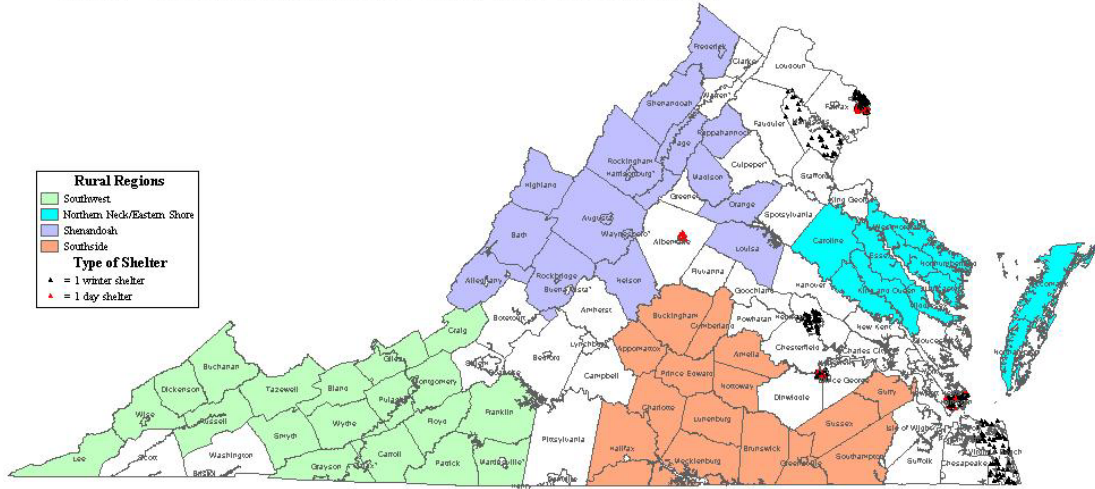
Map3. Emergency Shelter/Domestic Violence Facilities by Virginia Cities/Counties



Map 4. Transitional Housing Facilities by Virginia Cities/Counties



Map 5. Winter and Day Shelter Facilities by Virginia Cities/Counties



Service providers were asked to complete a questionnaire addressing service needs, shortfalls, and priorities for their areas. Those providing direct services to the poor were asked to keep a client log during the month of February. Each agency recorded data on the Homeless Client Log for any person who met any of the following conditions (provided to clients on a Screening Questionnaire):

- Currently without a house, apartment or other regular shelter of your own
- Doubled up (living with relatives or friends because you can not afford your own residence)
- Living in a home or shelter that is provided by someone other than yourself or your immediate family
- Spent any days within the last month when you have not had a residence of your own because of financial burdens
- Been evicted in the past month and not had a regular place to live

Data were collected only from individuals who were 18 or older. Parents or legal guardians were asked to provide information for minors.

The Homeless Client Log collected the following information for each client meeting the criteria for classification as homeless:

- Agency name and location
- First four letters of the client's last name (excluded for domestic violence shelters)
- Last four digits of social security number (excluded for domestic violence shelters)
- Head of household or single person
- Age
- Gender
- Race
- County of last permanent residence
- Enrolled in K-12
- Employed in last six months
- Two-parent household

Client mobility was determined by comparing service provider location and county of last permanent residence.

The Service Provider Questionnaire was completed by agencies offering programs to serve homeless persons. This questionnaire measured:

- Shelter provision (year-round, seasonal)
- Percentage of current funding for homeless services from federal, state, and local government, and private sources
- Checklist of services most in need
- Checklist of services that are currently inadequately provided
- Rank of top 5 services that are inadequately provided
- Target populations (e.g. victims of domestic violence, youth, mental illness)
- Checklist of factors contributing to homelessness of clients

Of the 248 agencies surveyed, 87 responded (Table 1). Response rates were highest for domestic violence shelters (88%), community action agencies (52%), and social service departments (51%). They were lowest for sheriffs, churches, and legal aid offices (all of which have a low likelihood of direct contact with the homeless that would allow them to complete the survey).

Table 1: Number of Agencies Surveyed and Response Rates

Agency	Surveyed	Responded	Response Rate
Social Services	65	33	51%
Com Service Boards	48	16	33%
Com Action	25	13	52%
Domestic Shelters	17	15	88%
Sal. Army Shelters	10	3	30%
Other*	83	7	8%
Total	248	87	35%

*Includes non-profit organizations and churches (23), Legal Aid (19), and Sheriffs (41)

Estimating the Number of Homeless

The most conservative estimate of rural homeless in Virginia is the actual count based on the Homeless Client Logs, with duplicates between agencies eliminated from the estimate. By this count, there were 1,829 homeless persons in rural Virginia in February, which provides an annualized estimate of 23,777 rural homeless events per year (Table 2). The annualized estimate is for homeless events rather than people. Homeless events count a homeless person for each month they are homeless. The survey design did not permit a measure of the length of homelessness.

Table 2: Estimated Number of Homeless Person Events, Rural Virginia, 2001

	Direct Count	Adjusted Estimate
Feb, 2001	1,829	2,817
Annualized*	23,777	36,621

*Count multiplied by 13 (52weeks/4weeks)

The conservative estimate (the log count) does not include any estimate of homeless persons for the service providers who did not respond to the survey. Clearly the most conservative assumption is that these providers did not encounter any homeless persons during the month of February. For several reasons this is probably an unrealistic assumption. Agencies that did not respond were contacted after the survey. Some agencies forgot to respond or were too busy to respond. Agencies that did not respond were contacted after the survey. Several reported that they did not respond because their area did not have people living on the streets. They explained that the homeless in their area were the “hidden” homeless—those without their own shelter or means to obtain shelter, but temporarily living with others. However, these persons should have been included in the count of homeless based on the federal definition and the survey instructions.

In order to estimate the number of homeless for agencies that did not respond to the survey, we calculated a “capitation rate” for those agencies that did respond. The capitation rate is the number of homeless reported by agencies of a given type (e.g. social service departments) divided by the population of the area. These capitation rates were calculated separately for each region in order to reflect variations in economic conditions between regions. Rates were calculated for Social Service Departments, Community Service Boards, Community Action Agencies, Salvation Army offices, and shelters. For shelters, the rate used the number of shelter beds for the shelters responding to the survey as the denominator. Capitation rates were not calculated for sheriffs’ offices, churches or Legal Aid offices, as it was less clear that these groups had direct contact with the homeless.

For agencies that did not respond to the survey, the number of homeless was estimated by multiplying the agency-specific capitation rate by the population of the area the agency serves. The number of homeless persons estimated for February 2001 including an estimate for the agencies that did not respond is 2,817. The annualized estimate of homeless person events is 36,621. The range between the direct count and the estimate adjusting for nonresponse provides the best indication of the probable range of rural homeless for Virginia: from 1,829 to 2,817 homeless persons in February and from 23,777 to 36,621 homeless person events for 2001.¹

Table 3 shows the largest number of rural homeless was found in Southwest Virginia, with 18,824 homeless person events estimated for 2001. This constitutes over half of the statewide estimate and was nearly twice as large as the next highest region, Shenandoah with 9,607. Significantly fewer rural homeless were found in Northern Neck/Eastern Shore (a much smaller region than the other three) and Southside Virginia.

¹ It is important to note that the direct count constitutes two-thirds of the adjusted estimate.

Table 3: Homeless by Region, 2001

Region	Direct Count February	Adjusted Estimate	Annualized Estimate
Southwest	1,105	1,448	18,824
Shenandoah	368	739	9,607
No Neck & E Shore	125	246	3,198
South	231	384	4,992
Total	1,829	2,817	36,621

Social Services Departments reported the largest number (1310) of homeless for February. As shown in Table 4, Social Service Departments were followed by Community Service Boards, Community Action Agencies, Domestic Shelters, and the Salvation Army. Obviously the vast majority of rural homeless are found outside the few shelters that do exist in rural areas.

Table 4: Rural Homeless by Agency, 2001

Region	Direct Count*	Adjusted Estimate
Social Services	859	1,310
Com Service Boards	368	657
Com Action	259	422
Domestic Shelters	241	241
Salvation Army	85	170
Other	57	57
Total	1870*	2857*

*including duplicates between agencies

One Planning District Commission—Cumberland Plateau—accounts for nearly a quarter of the rural homeless in Virginia (Table 5). Both Central Shenandoah and West Piedmont had slightly over 10% of the state total, followed by Lord Fairfax and New River Valley.

Table 5: Rural Homeless by PDC, 2001

Planning District Commission	Direct Count	Adjusted Estimate	Percent of State
Lenowisco	143	148	5.3%
Cumberland Plateau	645	685	24.3%
Mount Rogers	109	169	6.0%
New River Valley	91	237	8.4%
Fifth	33	64	2.3%
Central Shenandoah	253	332	11.8%
Lord Fairfax	94	275	9.8%
Rappahannock-Rapidan	12	37	1.3%
Thomas Jefferson	0	61	2.2%
Central Virginia	1	1	0.0%
West Piedmont	187	313	11.1%
Southside	29	51	1.8%
Piedmont	100	151	5.4%
RADCO	10	10	0.4%
Northern Neck	34	57	2.0%
Middle Peninsula	34	52	1.8%
Crater	7	29	1.0%
Accomack-Northampton	47	127	4.5%
Hampton Roads	0	17	0.6%
Total	1829	2816	100.0%

Profile of Rural Homeless

Table 6 provides a profile of rural homeless persons in Virginia. Three-fourths of the rural homeless are white and one-in-five is black. Less than two-thirds are householders and one-fifths have two adults in the household. (In some instances these were persons under the age of 18 with their own children in the family.) There were only slightly more females than males. Only one-fourth of the total number of rural homeless was employed. The percentage of employed adults is 37.3%.

Table 6: Profile of Rural Homeless in Virginia, 2001

	Percent
Householders	61.3%
Two adults in household	19.6%
Gender	
Male	46.8%
Female	53.2%
Age	
0-17	31.5%
18-24	16.3%
25-34	20.7%
35-49	21.8%
50-64	7.7%
65+	2.0%
In K-12	19.8%
Race	
White	74.2%
Black	19.6%
Other	6.2%
Employed	37.3%
Last Permanent Residence	
Same jurisdiction	45.4%
Same PDC	33.0%
Same region	9.1%
Different region	3.4%
Out-of-state	9.0%

About a third of the rural homeless is under the age of 18 and one-fifth is in the school grades of K-12. The majority of the rural homeless are between the ages of 18 and 49; less than 10% are 50 or over.

Less than half of the rural homeless had their last place of residence in the jurisdiction where they applied for services, but nearly 80% came from within the same PDC. Nearly 10% came from out-of-state.

Homeless Service Providers

Fifty-six service providers completed the agency questionnaire, with Social Service Departments (22) and domestic shelters (15) the most prevalent respondents. A profile of rural homeless service providers is provided in Table 7. About half reported providing shelter for the homeless. Funding was mainly split between federal and state government, with local or private funding accounting for a very small share of the total.

Table 7: Profile of Service Providers

	Percent
Provides shelter for homeless	49.9%
Percent federal funding	
0%	12.9%
1-25%	38.7%
26-50%	25.8%
51-75%	12.9%
76-100%	9.7%
Percent state funding	
0%	12.9%
1-25%	19.4%
26-50%	32.2%
51-75%	19.4%
76-100%	16.1%
Percent local funding	
0%	48.4%
1-25%	51.6%
26-50%	0.0%
51-75%	0.0%
76-100%	0.0%
Percent private funding	
0%	38.7%
1-25%	48.4%
26-50%	0.0%
51-75%	6.4%
76-100%	6.4%

Most service providers did not specify a target population (Table 8). Among the target populations specified, domestic violence victims were most frequent, followed by mental illness and substance abuse problems.

Table 8: Target Populations Identified by Service Providers

	Percent
No target population	58.2%
Domestic violence victims	47.3%
Runaway or homeless youth	9.1%
Mental illness	27.3%
Alcohol, drug problems	21.8%
Alcohol, drug and mental health	25.5%
HIV/AIDS	9.1%
Veterans	12.7%

Among the factors contributing to homeless identified by the service providers (Table 9), the top five factors were lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, mental illness, family break-up, and lack of job skills.

Table 9: Factors Contributing to Rural Homelessness

	Percent
Lack of affordable housing	85.5%
Domestic violence	76.4%
Mental illness	70.9%
Family break-up	70.9%
Lack of job skills	70.9%
Chronic unemployment	69.1%
Loss of job	65.5%
Lack of transportation	61.8%
Education	58.2%
Lack of rental housing	56.4%
Lack of job opportunity	45.5%
Physical illness	43.6%
Underemployment	43.6%
Lack of childcare	41.8%
Predatory lending	9.1%

The most frequently identified homeless service needs were transitional housing, transportation assistance, emergency rent assistance and emergency shelter (Table 10). These services were also the most often identified as being inadequately provided. Emergency shelter was most frequently ranked the number 1 service need, followed by transitional shelter and emergency rent assistance. Transportation assistance was ranked most often as the number 2 to number 5 priority. Medical services and financial management training were also ranked as the second to fifth priorities by about a third of the social service providers.

Table 10: Homeless Service Needs

	Most Needed	Inadequately Provided	Percent #1	Percent #2-5
Transitional housing	74.5%	53.7%	24.0%	36.0%
Transportation assistance	74.5%	63.0%	4.0%	56.0%
Emergency rent assistance	72.7%	57.4%	18.0%	32.0%
Emergency shelter	69.1%	55.6%	32.0%	14.0%
Cash/income assistance	58.2%	48.1%	0.0%	18.0%
Employment services and training	56.4%	46.3%	2.0%	16.0%
Medical services	50.9%	38.9%	2.0%	36.0%
Child care	50.9%	40.7%	0.0%	4.0%
Financial management training	47.3%	53.7%	0.0%	32.0%
Case management	43.6%	44.4%	2.0%	16.0%
Psychological counseling	40.0%	42.6%	4.0%	16.0%
Other food programs	38.2%	24.1%	2.0%	12.0%
Life skills training	34.5%	42.6%	2.0%	16.0%
Legal assistance	30.9%	38.9%	4.0%	10.0%
GED program	27.3%	9.3%	0.0%	10.0%
Clothing	25.5%	16.7%	2.0%	14.0%
Education	25.5%	22.5%	0.0%	16.0%
Soup kitchen	20.0%	29.6%	2.0%	8.0%

Conclusions:

- Estimated number of rural homeless is 23,777 - 36,621 annually.
- Few shelters are in rural Virginia. Those available are primarily domestic violence shelters.
- Shelters serve from 10% to 15% of rural homeless.
- Rural homeless are most prevalent in the Southwest and Shenandoah regions, particularly in Cumberland Plateau, Central Shenandoah, and West Piedmont PDCs.
- Children under age 18 constitute one-third of rural homeless.
- Few elderly persons are homeless in rural Virginia.
- Not all homeless adults are unemployed. Over one-third have jobs.
- The lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, mental illness, family break-ups, and lack of job skills are the most frequently cited factors causing rural homelessness according to service providers.
- The most needed services reported by service providers are transitional housing, transportation assistance, and emergency rent assistance.