



How to Engage the Media

Building strong relationships with media early in the planning process can improve volunteer recruitment, encourage stakeholder participation and shed light on the issue of homelessness. **However, the safety and confidentiality of survey participants should be protected at all times.** Specific procedures must be in place to work with media before, during and after the count, and these must be carefully followed.

The media will play a key role in helping your community understand what a PIT Count is and why it is important. Providing the local media with accurate and timely information about homelessness in your community, and the importance of your PIT Count, will improve public support for your count.

The strategies described below will help you to effectively engage the media while planning your count.

Develop a communication plan

Along with your list of media contacts, develop a communication plan that highlights the key messages about your PIT Count. The PIT Count Lead and others involved in planning and implementing the count should be prepared to speak about its strengths and limitations. Consider how you will respond to criticisms of the count. Since messages should remain consistent, you may decide to designate a single person as media contact (e.g., the Lead or an individual on the PIT Count committee with media experience).

Build a list of media contacts

During count planning, determine which news outlets, columnists, blogs and social media experts you will reach out to. Building partnerships with a handful of journalists at the outset ensures allies throughout your count; this will also help with volunteer recruitment and stakeholder engagement. The National Alliance to End Homelessness suggests searching for 'homelessness' on the websites of your local media. This will yield a list of journalists who focus on the issue.

Set ground rules for media participation

There are numerous benefits to working with the media, and careful planning and management will ensure the media respects the confidentiality of those encountered or surveyed during your count. Your communication plan should contain clear guidelines. Will you invite the media to the volunteer training? Will you ask the media to refrain from attending the count? Will you include them, but in a limited capacity? Set guidelines in advance and work with media to gain their cooperation.



Announce your PIT Count as early as possible

Once your participation in the Count is confirmed and your communication plan is developed, you should announce your PIT Count in the local media through a press release. Though your methodology will not yet be finalized, it is important to notify the media and the community as early as possible. This will allow you to control the message and, to some extent, the coverage of your PIT Count

Withhold the exact date of your count

While you should announce your count early, you may wish to withhold from the media the exact date. Some communities have found that too much advance notice affects results. Individuals experiencing homelessness may receive misinformation about the purpose of the count or the anonymity of their personal information, and then may avoid services or the downtown core on the day/night of the count. In your initial press release, consider specifying only the month. Closer to the count, when you put out a call for volunteers, you can provide further details on timing and, possibly, the training location.

Leverage your participation in the PIT Count

Advertise that your community is part of a coordinated effort to conduct PIT Counts across Texas and the United States. Explain the benefits of the PIT count and emphasize the importance of this initiative.

Explain what a PIT Count does (and does not) do

Many, including your media contacts, will be unfamiliar with PIT Counts. You can use the media to inform the public about the role PIT Counts play in addressing homelessness. Remember, a PIT Count is a "snapshot" of homelessness. Media and, by extension, the public must understand that your count will not yield a full picture of homelessness. Certain forms of homelessness, such as the experience of those who are not currently homeless but are at risk of homelessness, will not be captured. And since individuals move in and out of homelessness, a PIT Count will not enumerate everyone who experiences homelessness. However, the PIT Count will provide a useful baseline to measure progress from year to year, among other benefits.

A PIT Count is the perfect opportunity to raise the issue of homelessness with key stakeholders and the general public. Use your PIT Count and the resultant media coverage to shed light on the issue of homelessness in your community. The PIT Count is also an opportunity to combat stereotypes about homelessness: talk about who experiences homelessness and how your community is addressing the issue. Starting these conversations before your count will set the stage for sharing the results of your count.