At its recent annual meeting, UNITY of Greater New Orleans announced that, after years of having one of the nation’s highest homeless rates, there had been a dramatic decrease in people living on the street and in shelters. Jessie Arbuthnot, one of the faces of the post-Katrina homeless crisis, came to the meeting to be part of the announcement.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, Jessie Arbuthnot boarded a Greyhound bus in Houston and headed home.

He quickly landed a construction job, at slightly higher wages, he said. But rents had shot up far beyond his means. So Arbuthnot ended up in a sprawling homeless camp in Duncan Plaza, across from City Hall. As an often-photographed leader of that camp, Arbuthnot became a face of the post-Katrina explosion in homelessness, which peaked at an estimated 11,619 persons in early 2007.

That year, no other city had a rate of homelessness as high as New Orleans. In subsequent years, despite steady declines, the city’s homeless rate continued to be one of the highest in the nation.

But this year, Arbuthnot joined UNITY of Greater New Orleans to announce a dramatic drop in the city’s homeless population: it is now 79 percent lower.
Dear Friends:

Welcome to our new newsletter!

I am proud to tell you that the work we are doing together is creating an end to homelessness. Just a few years ago, due to the lingering effects of Hurricane Katrina, we were posting the highest homeless rate of any major metropolitan area. We had a humanitarian crisis on our hands and we needed an effective, compassionate response.

UNITY, along with our government partners and member agencies, worked tirelessly to provide housing and services to move people out of homelessness. I cannot express to you the joy I feel in knowing that we are effectively turning around this crisis. This year’s “snapshot” count of who was homeless during one night in February found 2,337 homeless individuals -- a drop of 79 percent from the 2007 count of 11,619 people.

Our work is not done. This year’s count was still 14 percent higher than UNITY’s pre-Katrina count for Jefferson and Orleans parishes.

With your volunteer time and financial support, we will aim high, to end the chronic homelessness of people with disabilities in our community in the next two years. By August 2015, the 10th anniversary of Katrina, we are determined there will be fewer people in homelessness than there were before the storm.

I am grateful for your support in bringing us this far and your partnership as we move forward.

Sincerely,

Martha J. Kegel, Executive Director

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Homelessness down by 79% since 2007

But still 14% higher than pre-Katrina

To reduce homelessness by 79 percent, the UNITY collaborative worked tirelessly to house thousands of people and targeted disabled, chronically homeless people through UNITY’s Permanent Supportive Housing initiative, a public-private partnership that has created a total of 2,300 supportive-housing units — apartments plus services — for the most vulnerable and disabled homeless people. That’s more than double what was available pre-Katrina.

The recently released Point in Time count is a federally required snapshot of people sleeping on the streets or in shelters in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes on any given night. Its total — 2,337 this year — represents a portion of the city’s homeless population, which constantly churns, as some people exit homelessness and others take their place.

By contrast, over the past year, UNITY and its agencies served a total of 19,930 different persons who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. The vast majority are New Orleans natives.

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2005 - 2013: Homelessness in New Orleans

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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Homelessness has decreased in part because UNITY and its partners have worked to increase the supply of Permanent Supportive Housing apartments plus supportive services for the most vulnerable, disabled and chronically homeless people.
Arbuthnot … from page 1

than 2007. (See chart on page 2.)

Since the storm, the UNITY collaborative of 60 agencies has housed thousands of homeless people. That work and the ongoing recovery of the city – rebuilt homes and newly built apartments – are responsible for the sharp decline, UNITY believes.

Large numbers of new apartments have helped to lower rents, making them more affordable to low-income people at risk of homelessness. Families returning home also offered up couches and spare beds to homeless relatives.

Looking back, Arbuthnot believes the Duncan Plaza camp served as a way station — of sorts — for low-income people returning home to New Orleans. He recalls his stay there as “a nightmare.”

Like many others in the camp, Arbuthnot had been through the worst of Katrina and its aftermath. Plucked by a helicopter from a roof in the inundated Lower 9th Ward and taken to the Superdome, he evacuated to Seattle on a FEMA plane and moved twice more to reunite with family. Two years later, he was ready to come home. “Houston treated me nice. But I knew I wasn’t no Houstonian,” he said.

Before the storm, Arbuthnot worked at The Times-Picayune as a stacker and lived on his own. That was no longer possible. “Houses that had been $500 to rent were $1,200 or more,” he said.

At Duncan Plaza, Arbuthnot helped to form a group, “Homeless Pride,” which patrolled in shifts and kept the peace while alerting UNITY about vulnerable arrivals such as parents with small children or gravely ill people.

The population of Duncan Plaza constantly shifted. New people arrived daily. Others left, as they landed better jobs or found new spots to sleep, often in abandoned houses. Arbuthnot said that most older people had lived with family before the storm. “So a lot of them were depressed, thinking that everyone done gave up on them.”

Arbuthnot, too, found that he was depressed. For nearly a year, he hadn’t even known that his mother and other family had survived. And he couldn’t shake the sight of the bodies he’d seen in the floodwaters.

Arbuthnot talked about those dark days in March, when he visited UNITY’s annual meeting to help announce the new, lower homelessness numbers.

UNITY caseworkers had visited the camps daily, he said. Then, just before Thanksgiving, agencies flocked to the park in vans, armed with lists of names of camp regulars. “One day, UNITY just came there and got everybody out,” he said.

Camp residents stayed in low-cost hotel rooms while the UNITY collaborative lined up apartments, jobs and supportive services, in a massive effort that UNITY Executive Director Martha Kegel called a “monumental humanitarian achievement.”

Between Nov. 2007 and July 2008, UNITY and its agencies, with help from government partners, rehoused 452 people from Duncan Plaza and another camp under the raised section of Claiborne Avenue at Canal Street. Many New Orleanians pitched in, with affordable apartments, household goods and donations.

With the help of rental assistance, Arbuthnot and other camp residents moved to a building on North Prieur Street owned by a landlord he’d met at work. They helped each other, Arbuthnot said, and Odyssey House caseworkers got him through his “little season” of depression.

He now lives in the Carrollton neighborhood and takes the bus to Reserve, where he works in the warehouse at Crystal Hot Sauce. His mother is back at home Uptown and he talks to her every day. And when he can, he pays his rent two or three months in advance.
When neighboring families move from the homeless shelter they’ve called home for a year, Jessica August’s three daughters want to follow. “Can we move too, Mama? Please?” they ask.

Displaced in Houston after Hurricane Katrina, August left last year to flee domestic violence. She and her children left with only the clothes they were wearing and drove to New Orleans, her hometown.

August and her family eventually ended up in a new UNITY pilot program called Rapid Rehousing for Families, which places households like hers in apartments with several months of rental assistance, to help them get back on their feet quickly.

But first the family spent a few nights sleeping in the car. Then they landed at Hagar’s House, run by First Grace United Methodist Church.

The residential shelter, with its large sunny playroom and sprawling garden in the backyard, has given them stability for a year. But before they move, August wants to be sure that they’ll never be homeless again.

She and her children are part of a growing issue – homeless families.

While the grizzled alcoholic on the park bench is the stereotypical public image of a homeless person, homeless families now make up more than one-third of the national homeless population. In New Orleans, roughly one of every five homeless people are children.

The littlest homeless people do have a drink of choice: “Milk,” said Ayesha Buckner, the homeless-student liaison for Orleans Parish School Board.

More than 2,600 homeless children attend school in New Orleans, where a dozen schools have at least 40 or 50 homeless students and one has more than 90. A total of 787 students without homes have been identified by the Orleans Parish School Board, the only local district whose charters and schools have a fulltime homeless liaison – Buckner.

In New Orleans, where one in four adults and nearly half of children live in poverty, increases in homelessness can be difficult to discern. Karen Jackson, director of Salvation Army’s social service for greater New Orleans, sees a consistent, high level of need for their family programs, which serve some of the poorest families in the city.

“The parents are working in fast-food places or in retail stores like Walmart, but without more training or better education, they can’t get decent employment at a living wage,” she said.

To help families stay out of homelessness, she’s partnering with Goodwill Industries to implement an 18-week hospitality-certification program designed to help graduates bypass entry-level jobs and move into better positions.

At its root, the number of homeless families is growing because of housing costs that outpace wages, to the point that about one in 10 poor adults and children become homeless each year, according to Urban Institute research.

In its latest annual study examining rents and wages, the National Low-Income Housing Coalition found that in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment, a New Orleans family working fulltime needed to earn $37,920 a year, make
$18.23 per hour, or work 2.5 jobs at minimum wage.

Few can easily afford that apartment. The Greater New Orleans Data Center found in 2009 that 47 percent of all fulltime, year-round adult New Orleans workers made less than $35,000 a year.

The center calculated that, for the nearly 21,000 food preparers and servers in the city who made an average of $17,608 per year, an affordable apartment would be $440, covering both rent and utilities. But those types of rents simply don’t exist in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina.

Last year, in Orleans and Jefferson parishes, the UNITY collaborative of agencies assisted about 4,000 children of unknown ages. Nationally, 42 percent are under age six.

In most homeless families nationally, at least one parent has a job. In New Orleans, Buckner – like Jackson at the Salvation Army – most often sees parents who work at fast-food places or in the hospitality industry. “They’re not sitting around or begging. They’re working, but making minimum wage,” she said.

August has worked ever since she was a teenager, when her mother died of cancer, leaving her alone in the world. Her UNITY rental assistance will be gone quickly, so August knows she needs a second job, on top of the bakery position she works on weekends.

August also needs to locate an apartment with reasonable rent and utilities paid, to keep her bills level. The apartment must be near a main bus route or she has to find a cheap used car to get around. And she needs to find stable, odd-hours childcare to replace the relative who can no longer watch August’s children on weekends.

It’s a lot of loose ends to tie together. But during rocky times, August remembers her mother, a nurse. “She was a worker. I never knew her not to be working,” she said. August too believes that she can work her way out of this situation.

“I’ll get there. I’m just not there yet,” she said.

At least every month, Buckner checks in with the roughly 900 homeless students she oversees, looking at their attendance and how they’re doing in their studies. Most – 787 – are in school board schools, with 40 more in Catholic schools.
Starting Over

Typically, homeless people own nothing but what they carry.

Last year, the UNITY warehouse gave nearly 500 formerly homeless people “starter kits” of essential household items so that they could restart their lives in apartments found for them by the UNITY collaborative.

UNITY receives federal funding to help pay client rents and to help fund case managers at UNITY’s agencies. There is insufficient funding available for furniture, toiletries and household goods. The warehouse relies on donations of bedding, toiletries, pots and pans, dishes, coffeepots and furniture.

To donate new or gently used household goods (no clothing, please), call development director Ali James at ajames@unitygno.org or 504.821.4496 x 114. Or call the warehouse directly at 483.9300.

DISPELLING
THE MYTHS

MYTH: Homelessness is a long-term condition

The most common length of time that someone is homeless is one or two days, and half the people who enter the homeless shelter system will leave within 30 days, never to return, writes homelessness researcher Dennis Culhane of the University of Pennsylvania.

Culhane noted recently in The Washington Post that nearly all of the long-term homeless have tenuous family ties and some kind of disability, whether it is a drug or alcohol addiction, a mental illness, or a physical handicap. They make up a small share of the homeless population, but consume nearly 60 percent of the resources spent on emergency and transitional shelter for adults, and they occupy hospitals and jails at high rates. So to house them makes financial sense.

How we compare in New Orleans

Rate of long-term homelessness in New Orleans twice national rate

Nationally, almost 16 percent of homeless people are chronically homeless. In New Orleans, the proportion is double the national rate, at 29 percent. Longtime homelessness became more common in New Orleans after Katrina, as extended families scattered across the country and rents rose exponentially. Vulnerable people who had previously been cared for by their families were plunged into homelessness while previously self-sufficient people became disabled by stress-related physical and mental illnesses.

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UNITY ... 
IN THE NEWS

The following is excerpted from Richard Webster’s March 27 piece for The Times-Picayune about UNITY’s newly released homeless count, which showed a sharp decrease in homelessness in the city.

“This is a magnificent victory,” said Martha Kegel, executive director of Unity of Greater New Orleans, at the homeless advocacy group’s 21st annual meeting.

[Because of] the help of Unity and the Bridge House/Grace House program, Tywana Lewis now has her own apartment and is assistant general manager at a job she has held for two years.

“I’ve been able to do things I never thought I could do like build a relationship with my two daughters who are both in college,” Lewis said. “I can go home and put a key in the door. I don’t have to worry about what curb I’m going to sleep on.”

This is excerpted from Maya Rodriguez’s piece for WWL-TV:

For nearly three years, Darryl Irvin teetered in and out of homelessness. As drug use consumed his life, he slept where he could.

“I slept in parks and stuff like that, cars or whatever,” he said. …

Today, though, it is a different story: through the help of local agencies that help the homeless, Irvin cleaned up his life and now has an apartment. He is also part of a 79 percent drop in the number of area homeless.

Keller Building receives notable architectural award

Recently, UNITY’s Rosa F. Keller Building was one of only six structures honored worldwide - only three within the United States - by the Social Economic Environmental Design awards for design in the public interest. Award jurors said that the building “served a critical need in the community,” and that “the socio-economic benefits of this project are immense and the design product provides dignity.”

Last year, UNITY of Greater New Orleans opened The Rosa F. Keller Building at 2222 Tulane Ave. as part of its Permanent Supportive Housing initiative, which creates apartments to house low-income workers along with the most sick and fragile homeless individuals. The initiative is a central part of UNITY’s recent successes.

The Keller provides 60 affordable apartments to an income-integrated population: 30 house low-wage workers and 30 are home to formerly homeless persons, who also receive crucial on-site case-management services. The initiative’s buildings also prevent homelessness for low-wage workers, the backbone of New Orleans’ economy, by providing the deeply affordable apartments that are severely needed in a city where rents are 40 percent higher than before Hurricane Katrina.

The UNITY initiative uses a concept called Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), which couples housing with supportive services. UNITY’s on-site case managers help access jobs and mainstream government benefits so that tenants can keep up with household and healthcare costs.

Co-developers HRI Properties and Community Solutions designed the project; HRI manages the building in partnership with UNITY.

Last month, Greensource magazine wrote this about the new structure’s courtyard: “We really learned its importance after completion,” explains Jeanne Reaux-Connor, UNITY’s director of housing development.

“Supportive-housing tenants are literally coming off the streets, and the most vulnerable tenants have a resistance to physical enclosure. The courtyard gives them the feeling of remaining outside,” he said.
and about 75 in other local school districts. Even if they’re outside her jurisdiction, she can’t turn away a homeless child, she says.

Homeless children are often worried about being discovered, because of social stigma or because they worry that their parent will get in trouble, said Buckner, who instructs her teachers and social workers to watch closely in the cafeteria for a child who eats everything on her plate and then asks for more.

“Hunger is the first sign of homelessness,” she said.

In elementary school, teachers can detect homelessness fairly quickly because of fatigue, poor hygiene and incomplete homework. Or they can look at a kid and see something’s wrong. “Elementary-school students wear it on their faces,” Buckner said.

Without a car, Jessica August must continue the bus rides that can take up to four hours each, because of downtown construction lags and as many as three transfers. Her weekday odysseys make even a part-time job impossible on weekdays.

She gets everybody ready before 7 a.m., walks the oldest two daughters to a school-bus stop, puts them on a bus and then climbs onto a city bus with her youngest. They head Uptown to a Head Start, the only one with a spot for her child. Then August goes downtown to look for jobs and affordable apartments. By 2 p.m., she’s back on the bus, headed Uptown to pick up her youngest, who accompanies her on two more buses. They get to the charter school, pick up the older daughters from the school’s aftercare program and catch two more buses. Altogether, five transfers spanning seven buses, August said. “Back and forth, back and forth.”

A version of this piece, by UNITY communications director Katy Reckdahl, was first published in The Exchange, a $1 street paper sold by homeless and formerly homeless vendors. Vendors gain work experience, get back on their feet, and maybe even earn enough to rent an apartment. To learn more, please visit nolastreets.org.