

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

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A Call for Public Health Authorities to Track and Respond to Homeless Deaths

What is your city or county doing about homeless deaths?

“Premature Mortality in Homeless Populations,” a study released on Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day, December 21, demonstrated that homeless people suffer extraordinary rates of premature death. “Homeless persons are 3-4 times more likely to die than the general population,” concluded Dr. Jim O’Connell’s review of the scientific literature on the question. These stunning findings within an identifiable population group should cause public health authorities – who are responsible for monitoring the health of population groups – to sit up and take notice. Regrettably, few local authorities have responded to this public health crisis. In most communities, the causes, locations, and circumstances surrounding deaths of our homeless neighbors are not being tracked or analyzed, and effective interventions are not being planned.

This dearth of official information was evident to the organizers of Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day events in scores of cities, who collected names of homeless decedents from diverse sources, including HCH projects, Consumer Advisory Boards and other homeless people, other service providers and news accounts. Only rarely were Public Health Agencies or coroners’ offices prepared to assist in compiling the names.

This issue of the *Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer* calls on public health authorities to annually compile and analyze data regarding the deaths of persons known to have been homeless. Such data is crucial for the next, far more important step: public health agencies should plan and implement interventions to reduce the unacceptable level of death among homeless persons.

Examples to follow

Public Health – Seattle-King County is a good example of a public health agency that has taken the high death rates of homeless people quite seriously. The Department’s Health Care for the Homeless Network collaborates with the King County Medical Examiner to develop and analyze data on homeless deaths in the county each year. Their latest Annual Report on Homeless Deaths is available at <http://www.nhhc.org/memorialday.html>

Last July in New York City, where an estimated 35,000 people reside in the shelter system, Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed into law a requirement that the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene track and report quarterly on the causes and locations of deaths among the homeless. “Our hope,” Mayor Bloomberg explained, “is that the information generated by this report can be used to better focus our outreach and intervention strategies.” The New York legislation is also available at <http://www.nhhc.org/memorialday.html>

Findings to expect

“Premature Mortality in Homeless Populations” challenges common assumptions about the causes of death among homeless people and about when those deaths are most likely to take place. Contrary to the belief that behavioral health issues are most responsible for death on the streets, the report concludes that the presence of a physical health problem – such as cancer or heart disease – is a greater predictor of premature mortality than is an addiction or mental illness alone. The report also challenges the assumption that death among homeless populations is concentrated during the coldest winter months. Several studies reviewed in the report showed very little seasonal variance in premature death and found that hypothermia and exposure actually are relatively infrequent causes of death among the homeless.

Interventions to promote

A number of interventions are needed to prevent these unnecessary deaths. Planning for access to health care, a traditional public health function, must explicitly address the access issues faced by homeless persons. Advocates should work with public health authorities to improve access to care and increase local investment in health care. In addition to local planning efforts, public health agencies can help to assure a sufficient supply and equitable distribution of health care resources by endorsing House Resolution 676, the single-payer legislation long supported by the National HCH Council. Attention to another historic public health concern, the conditions of housing, can provide another avenue for public health to address homelessness locally. Public health authorities, public housing agencies and advocates should work together to assure that decent, safe and sanitary housing is available for all local residents. Endorsement of a national proposal intended to increase the supply of housing, the National Housing Trust Fund, would be one reasonable step for Boards of Health or other public bodies concerned about homeless deaths to take; work to create state or local affordable housing trust funds is likewise appropriate.

ACTION:

- Ask your local Health Department to track deaths among people experiencing homelessness. Contact information for your local health officials is available at <http://lhadirectory.naccho.org/phdir> If the health department declines to do so, ask the local governing body to require such action, as the City Council in New York did.
- Share “Premature Mortality in Homeless Populations” and other resources on the deaths of homeless persons with your friends, co-workers, Boards of Directors, and, most importantly, with elected/appointed officials, including the leadership of your local public health authority. Useful materials are available at www.nhchc.org/memorialday.html
- Contact the National Council for technical assistance on working with your local officials to track the causes and locations of homeless deaths in your community. The National Health Care for the Homeless Council’s Health Policy Specialist can be reached at djohnson@hchmd.org and 443/703-1395.

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