

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

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National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day

December 21, 2006

A Moment of Silence . . .

As clinicians and service providers know all too well, homelessness causes, complicates, and exacerbates serious health problems – leading to the premature death of thousands of people in our communities every year. Many die alone, silently, and without public recognition. While much of the nation prepares to celebrate the winter holidays, we pause on December 21 – the first day of winter and the longest night of the year – to commemorate National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, when we formally remember our homeless friends and neighbors who died in 2006.

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council again joins the National Coalition for the Homeless to commemorate the 16th annual Memorial Day. Last year, candlelight vigils, religious ceremonies, moments of silence, and other public events were held in over 100 communities throughout the country. Similar events are planned again this year in pursuit of public policies capable of making homelessness increasingly rare and brief.

. . . A New Year of Action

It is often misconceived that violence and weather-related injuries are the leading causes of death among people experiencing homelessness. A study published last year by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council – entitled *Premature Mortality in Homeless Populations* – shows that premature death among people experiencing homelessness is more closely associated with acute and chronic medical conditions and with restricted access to comprehensive health care. The mortality study provides further evidence that the disproportionate rates of premature death on the streets can be ameliorated by guaranteeing access to comprehensive health care.

The start of the new Congress in 2007 provides a renewed opportunity to continue our collective work toward fulfillment of the human rights to health care, sufficient income, and housing. Speaker of the House-elect Nancy Pelosi has listed health care access and affordability among her top priorities of the coming session. Advocates and service providers can do much to galvanize support for comprehensive health care reform in the 110th Congress. After decades of incremental policy reform, the nation nonetheless has more people working for less money, greater numbers of uninsured, and more people living – and dying – on our streets.

The National Council is committed to continuing and intensifying our advocacy for comprehensive health reform in the coming year and beyond. As we remember our homeless friends and neighbors who died in 2006, may we all recommit ourselves to this important work.

ACTION

Determine how many homeless people died in your community in 2006: Shelters, HCH projects, and other services providers often maintain an annual record of deaths. The local morgue or medical examiner's office may release the names of people who died without a known address, and the police department may keep track of people thought to be homeless who were victims of homicide. Additionally, other people experiencing homelessness can be resourceful in providing names and stories of their friends who have passed away. A memorial litany is effective in memorializing those who have died homeless.

Plan an event to commemorate Memorial Day: If no event is planned, take the initiative to assemble a memorial in your community or at your HCH project. Be sure to involve other organizations in planning and implementing the event. Encourage your clients, staff, and board members to participate. Include a reading of the names of those who have died.

Work with the media: Media coverage of homelessness is at its highest during the winter season. Contact your local paper to ensure coverage of Memorial Day, write a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece about homelessness in your community, or ask the editor to publish the names of who have died homeless in 2006.

Work with your local government: If your Mayor and/or City Council has not already done so, encourage them to declare the first day of winter to be National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day in your community. Contact those who represent you locally about introducing a formal resolution to affirm the governing body's commitment to ending homelessness.

Share details of your event with the National HCH Council: The National Council is collecting the details of locally-planned Memorial Day events and will publish the names of people who died in 2006 on our website. Please send names and event information to Katy Valesky at kvalesky@nhchc.org.

For more information and event ideas: View the Memorial Day materials on-line at www.nhchc.org. For additional questions about Memorial Day or organizing an event in your community, contact Adrienne Breidenstine at abreidenstine@hchmd.org

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