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Bells to chime 70 times at event for homeless

Memorial honors those who died in '07

By Lynn Anderson

Sun reporter

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Church bells will toll 70 times today - once for each Baltimore resident who died while seeking permanent shelter in 2007.

The event, part of Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, a national event to commemorate those who lived in shelters or parks, or who stayed with relatives because they had no place else to go, follows a period of intense activity around the issue of homelessness in the city.

Last week, city officials scrambled to find beds for nearly 35 men and women who were living in tarp encampments under the Jones Falls Expressway. Since then, outreach workers have been trying to find apartments for them and sign them up for other social and medical benefits. And this week, a forum was held to discuss ways to provide permanent housing for the homeless.

"There does seem to be this new collaboration between the city and advocates," said Diane Glauber, head of the city's homeless services division. "It's very exciting. We are all working toward solutions."

Glauber and others have been working for about a year to create a 10-year plan to end homelessness. The plan is near completion, she said, and will be unveiled by Mayor Sheila Dixon next month.

Philip F. Mangano, executive director of the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness, who is scheduled to attend today's event, said cities and states can be eligible for federal grant money if they develop such plans.

Baltimore's plan is expected to call for the creation of 100 housing units for the chronically homeless in the first year as well as the introduction of legislation that would make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against residents who use federal housing vouchers.

The plan could also call for replacing the city's winter shelter with a year-round, 24-hour shelter, which would provide clients with health, legal and employment development services. The city is looking for a suitable location for the shelter.

The winter shelter houses 200 to 300 men, women and children a night, Glauber said.

The memorial service is held each year on Dec. 21, the first day of winter and the longest night of the year. In years past, those who attended in Baltimore included family members of those who died homeless, as well as advocates and city officials. The crowd lights candles and stands in silence as the names of those who died are read aloud.

"On Dec. 21, we remember the advice of Mother Jones to 'pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living,'" said Bishop Douglas Miles of the Koinonia Baptist Church, who will participate in the memorial event.

Advocates said that many of the deaths could have been prevented.

"Let us work together to build a future in which there is no need to hold memorial services for people who die without housing - a future without homelessness," said Jeff Singer, president and chief executive officer of Health Care for the Homeless, which provides medical services to the homeless in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

At the forum, held Wednesday at the Pleasant View Gardens Community Center, city Housing Authority Director Paul Graziano said he supports the plan to stop landlords from discriminating against those who use housing vouchers.

"That is something that we think is desperately needed," he said. "It is a situation that needs to be addressed."

Some homeless people who attended the forum said they are doubtful that the city is serious about ending homelessness. They asked questions about the decrease in public housing - the number of occupied units in Baltimore has dropped by 42 percent since the early 1990s - and about federal housing vouchers. Even if someone has a housing voucher, which covers rent, the holder of the voucher is required to make a security deposit and pay for utilities.

Glauber tried to reassure them.

"Those [costs] could be paid for with other funds," she said, adding that groups such as the Abell Foundation could give the city money.

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