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Homeless Vigil

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BILLINGS - For those of us with warm homes, it is hard to imagine living without shelter, but for hundreds in the Billings area, being homeless is a difficult reality that can sometimes lead to premature deaths. A candlelight vigil was held Monday to remember nearly 50 homeless people from Yellowstone County who died in the past year.

Event organizers said those without homes often die from illness, exposure to the heat and cold, and hate crimes. One organizer, Clarence Salley, said the candles at the memorial act as a powerful symbol.

"I've chosen to use candles because it's a really good symbol, close to the first day of winter, how easily a candle can be blown out, or life, or health," Salley said.

Even though a winter chill is in the air, local social agency officials said that the winter months do not necessarily cause an increase in the number of people who seek shelter.

Officials said they have observed an increase of about 1,000 new homeless people each year, as they head through town. No studies have been conducted for seasonal numbers regarding Yellowstone County's homeless population; however, officials said they have observed a rise in population numbers during certain times of the year, such as when migrant workers come to town.

An estimate by the Mayor's Committee on Homelessness found there are usually about 2,000 people without shelter in Yellowstone County.

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