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Deaths of homeless people noted at vigil

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CAMDEN

A small but hardy group of homeless people and their supporters gathered outside a South Camden health clinic Friday evening to remember those who've died in the past year and to ask for help for those whose troubles are just beginning.

Friday was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year and the official start of the hardest season for the homeless.

"On this long, dark night we mourn the loss of special people," said Maria Pinaro, an outreach worker at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center, "people who suffered the heartbreak of losing home."

Following prayers, Shana Mitchell and Lynn Langston, staff members at the Bergen Lanning Health Center, read the names of homeless people who have died in Camden County this year.

Two dozen people in attendance each clutched a candle, shielding it from the wind, listening quietly as 21 names were read.

"Lawren Barnes, September 18th," Mitchell began.

"Walter Cannon, January 1st," Langston responded.

Mitchell estimated as many as 2,000 people are homeless in Camden County.

They come from all walks of life, Langston said.

"All were neighbors," she said, and "none of them asked to become homeless. When they were in seventh grade and their teachers asked them what they wanted to be, they said "fireman and . . . doctor and . . . president of the United States."

What she and the others there aspire to, Langston said, is "to bring this national disgrace to an end. What we aspire to is a day when no more memorial services need to be planned."

Friday's service was sponsored by Project H.O.P.E., the Lourdes' agency that runs the Bergen Lanning Health Center at the corner of Clinton and West streets.

Staff members from the center told the stories of three homeless women at the service.

Nancy Hughes read what she called "Rebecca's story."

"Two things happened when I was 12," Hughes read for Rebecca. "My father left and I started using drugs."

When she was 13 years old, Rebecca's mother's new partner "raped me repeatedly."

By age 14, she could take what she described as this "hell on earth" no longer and gave her mother an ultimatum.

"After my Mom chose him, I landed on the streets."

She began cutting herself on the arms, she said, just to feel something other than the pain inside.

"The last time I tried to kill myself," she said, "someone found me" before she bled to death.

Following the service, two men who said they are homeless, Kevin Taylor, 41, and Perry Moore, 55, appealed to city officials to be generous this winter in declaring Code Blue, the emergency situation under which homeless people are brought in from the cold.

"It's not right," Moore said, contending the only shelter he's been able to find on occasion is the Walter Rand Transportation Center downtown. City officials were not available Friday evening to comment.

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