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## Memorial for homeless tonight

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By PERRY SWANSON  
THE GAZETTE  
December 21, 2007 - 1:49AM

A memorial service tonight will honor people who died because they were homeless.

The event, called the "Longest Night of the Year Memorial Service," happens on the winter solstice, a night that will last nearly 15 hours.

"Symbolically, it's the hardest night for somebody staying outside," said Stephen Handen, who runs Mesa House, a small shelter in Colorado Springs for homeless people. The people who stay outside, in homeless shelters or other unstable housing are at especially high risk for problems, Handen said.

"Any time you have any of those issues of alcoholism or drug abuse or mental illness or lack of job skills ... (being) homeless exacerbates those problems far more than they would if a person had shelter," he said. "Homelessness, per se, doesn't kill somebody, but it makes life tough."

The memorial service starts at 5:30 p.m. in the parking lot of the Veterans Administration building, at the corner of Spruce Street and Pikes Peak Avenue. Participants will walk from there to Bijou House, an agency that helps the homeless. Anyone may attend. A study conducted last year estimated there are 1,136 homeless people in El Paso County.

About 17 percent of respondents to the survey said they were living on the streets or elsewhere outside. The rest were in transitional housing, shelters, or staying with family or friends. Nearly 60 percent said they suffer from at least one serious medical condition.

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