

National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day

By ANGELA BRANDT - *Independent Record* - 12/22/07

Friday marked the first day of winter and the longest night of the year.

Organizers of a ceremony to mark Homeless Persons' Memorial Day said the day and its chilly weather was significant, showing the struggles those without adequate housing go through.

Most of the nearly 100 people in attendance only had to shiver in the 30-degree weather for an hour, while some had nowhere to go for shelter afterward.

During the memorial at Women's Park the names of 27 homeless Montanans who died this year were read, including 13 from the Helena area.

The annual ceremony was held on the Capitol steps in 2005 and 2006.

Only about 17 people showed up to the first ceremony two years ago, according to Sherrie Downing, coordinator of the Governor's Council on Homelessness. That number more than doubled to about 50 attendees last year, and again jumped by two this year.

Downing said organizers decided to move the memorial to Women's Park in order to make it more accessible to the homeless, who showed up in droves.

Downing reminded the audience that the homeless have many faces.

"There is no one story. There are a million stories," she said.

These people are mothers, fathers, uncles, friends, Downing added.

Not only do their stories vary but also their causes of death, including mental illness and untreated medical problems.

Most if not all of those named died young, she said. The average age of death for the homeless is about 50, compared to 78 for Americans with shelter.

Gerard "Frog" Fortin shared the story of his friend Jesse Stephenson, who died from leukemia in July at the age of 44.

Stephenson, who had been homeless, was given his own apartment when his health failed. He lived there for six days before he succumbed to the disease.

"As soon as you are given a death sentence, then you are given a place to live," Fortin told the crowd. "You got to do it before they die."

Fortin, who lived on the street for decades, said his drive to help the homeless came from having to sleep on a mat between a heroin addict and a woman trying to cry herself to sleep.

Fortin asked those he knows in the homeless community what he should say at the memorial and the overwhelming response was “get it done.”

The crowd cheered when he said and repeated the phrase.

Fortin said the system is failing the homeless by not providing adequate health care and shelter. Services for the homeless are hard to come by and even more difficult to access, he said.

While Fortin apologized for possibly being too passionate about the cause, he said he was amazed by the love shown by the community members who attended to honor those who died.

Hank Hudson, co-chairman of the Governor’s Council on Homelessness, said Helena has a relatively large homeless population and therefore more names read because of the services available, including God’s Love Shelter and those at Fort Harrison.

In addition to Stephenson’s name, the other names read from the Helena area were: Wayne Cole, Randall Dahlin, Richard “Bamma” Droggs, Mary Ruth Fields, Charles Ingle, Guy Johnson, Steven Kriechbaum, Mariano Listo Jr., William Rennick, Denise Shoulderblade, Franklin “McGoo” Thorton and Nancy Walsweer.

“They have gone on their homebound journeys. They are home,” Fortin said.

Reporter Angela Brandt: 447-4078 or angela.brandt@helenair.com