



Posted on: Saturday, December 22, 2007

Prayers for homeless souls

By [Mary Vorsino](#)
Advertiser Urban Honolulu Writer

More than 50 people gathered at Ala Moana Beach Park yesterday to remember at least 15 homeless people who died this year in Hawai'i.

"They were somebody. They were somebody's child. Everybody has a name," said kahu Umi Sexton of I Am Ministries in Waimanalo, who spoke to the group.

In the three-hour memorial at Ala Moana Park, homeless people shared stories of life on the streets and friends who had died — some from substance abuse, others from a long illness.

Ioane Fasavalu, 48, who sleeps just outside the park every night, said he lost a childhood friend this year. The two grew up in the same village in Samoa, he said, adding that his friend suddenly died in his sleep at Ala Moana. The man, called Freddy, was 42.

Advocates said statistics on the number of homeless in Hawai'i this year are difficult to pin down because no agency collects data, and the state and counties generally do not record such information when a person dies. In previous years, the Affordable Housing and Homeless Alliance in the Islands estimated about 30 homeless people die each year.

But the estimate was based on a smaller homeless population.

Darlene Hein, program manager of Waikiki Care-A-Van, which serves 2,000 homeless people on O'ahu with medical care, supplies and other items, said she knows of at least nine clients who have died this year.

"We lost one this week," she said.

Hein said other homeless "just disappear."

Causes of death for homeless in the Islands, she said, vary from being hit by cars to succumbing to chronic diseases.

Despite the lack of numbers, service providers point out homeless are at increased risk of death on the streets because of untreated illnesses, poor hygiene or exposure to the elements.

A recent report from the National Health Care for the Homeless Council found the average age of death among the homeless is 50, compared to 78 for the general population.

Ruth Kovacs of Street Beat, the newspaper for the homeless that helped sponsor yesterday's memorial, said the homeless are often dehumanized. Thinking about them as people makes it a lot more difficult to imagine them dying on the streets, she said.

"They were people with meaningful lives," she said.

The memorial comes as the city, state and advocates are beefing up homeless programs and services to address growing numbers of people on the streets. Over the past several years, city, state and nonprofit agencies have spent millions of dollars to ease the homeless crisis, opening shelters and expanding programs.



A prayer circle was formed yesterday by people who gathered at Ala Moana Beach Park to remember homeless that died this year.

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The problem, spurred largely by a dearth of affordable housing, is seen as one of the largest social issues facing the state.

In a news release yesterday, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced it would increase funding to emergency shelter and other homeless programs in Hawai'i.

Nonprofits in the state will get \$7 million in federal funds — about \$1 million more than last year — for homeless programs in the coming fiscal year as part of a record \$1.5 billion in HUD appropriations nationwide to increase homeless services.

The remembrance yesterday was one of dozens across the country for National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, which has been held on the first day of winter since 1990 to remember homeless who have died and bring attention to those who will spend the holidays — and the coldest months — on the street.

The memorial was first held in 2004 in Hawai'i, organizers said, but gatherings in past years have been much more low key.

The event yesterday was well advertised among homeless populations with providers, and so many turned out to receive health screenings, hygiene products, a hot meal and clothes.

Robert and Natalie Lebeau, who have been homeless since 1996, came to the event in their van from Waimanalo.

Natalie Lebeau, 50, said she knows at least five people who have died on the streets this year. Her friend, Debra Rosa, knew of at least that many, too. The 53-year-old also is homeless in Waimanalo, and is working to get a roof over her head.

"Hawai'i is one expensive place to live," Rosa said.

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