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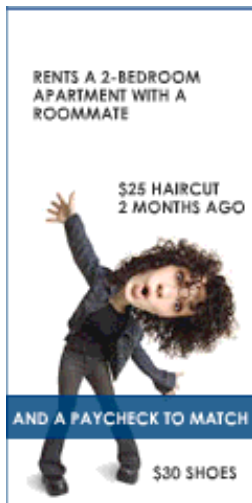
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Staff photo by Corey Perrine

Various people, mostly affiliated with Harbor Homes, light candles on the steps at City Hall on Friday in Nashua. About a dozen people came out to say prayers and list individuals who have passed away while homeless and pay tribute to their lives.

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Local/Regional

Published: Saturday, December 22, 2007

Remembering the homeless with a vigil

By **STEPHANIE HOOPER, Telegraph Staff**

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NASHUA – Shivering in 18-degree air on the steps of City Hall on Friday night, Peter Kelleher struggled to light a candle.

"It gives you an idea of how difficult it is to do something in the cold," Kelleher, the president and CEO of Harbor Homes Inc., told the 10 or so other people who were also attempting to light candles in honor of National Homeless Person's Memorial Day.

Information gathered from area agencies that work with the homeless population shows that at any point in time an average of 500-600 homeless people are living in the Greater Nashua area.

"In the 26 years I have been doing this, I have see a lot of people come and go," Kelleher said prior to the start of the half-hour-long vigil.

The vigil, mostly attended by those who work with the local homeless community, featured prayers and a reading of the names of 141 deceased New Hampshire residents known to have struggled with homelessness at some time in their lives.

The vigil began with a moment of silence for the local homeless population and the nine Nashua residents, some homeless or formerly homeless, who died this year.

Among the recently deceased was Ray Larocque, 39, a father of three who died Nov. 11 of a drug overdose. Larocque participated in last year's vigil, breaking into tears when he read the name of Dan Lessard, a homeless friend of his who died in 2005 at the age of 28.

Like many of the chronically homeless, Larocque's periods of homelessness stemmed from his battle with drugs and alcohol.

Following the 2006 vigil, Larocque, who was three months' sober at the time, explained the struggle of trying to land a job without a permanent address, phone number or even clean clothes for an interview.

"People just don't understand," Larocque said.

"It's the way society looks at you."

Helping the Homeless

For help, or to offer help, citizens can contact these local agencies:

- Keystone Hall Greater Nashua Council on Alcoholism Inc., 881-4848.
- Community Council of Nashua behavioral health services, 889-6147.
- Harbor Homes residential and supportive services, 882-3616.
- Nashua Soup Kitchen & Shelter, 889-7770.
- Nashua Pastoral Care Center, shelter for families, 886-2866.
- Mary's House shelter for women, 886-3562
- Nashua Welfare Department, 589-4555.
- Nashua Housing Authority, 883-5661.
- State Welfare, 1-800-458-5542.

For more information about homelessness visit www.nationalhomeless.org.

It's a sentiment that Ken Lewis, program director of Connections, can relate to on a personal level.

Lewis, 47, who works with the homeless through the Harbor Homes' program, estimated he had spent a quarter of his life homeless due to a drug and alcohol problem.

"I was living in an old burned out house," Lewis said, describing his worst day as a homeless person in Nashua in 1994.

"I had nothing to eat, and I just remember being cold and hungry . . . I broke down crying. I didn't want to live like that anymore."

For Lewis, help came with a bed at Keystone Hall, a local substance abuse treatment program where he was able to detoxify his body of drugs and alcohol while living among other addicts who were trying to improve their lives.

"I was lucky," Lewis said.

"Nowadays, you don't have that many beds," he said, describing how homeless addicts in the same situation today often spend weeks waiting to get such help.

Even for those without chemical addictions, shelter is scarce.

Local shelters admit people between the hours of 5:30 and 6:30 p.m., Lewis said, and often end up turning people away, directing them to call city welfare, which closes its doors at 4 p.m.

Lewis said he often directs people to go to city welfare before 3 p.m. to get assistance in getting a spot in the shelter, and if that is not possible, a room for the night, as is required.

There are still people spending nights on the streets, however, and some, despite the recent snow, are spending those nights tented in the woods, he said.

Mark Vallee, 48, a self-described alcoholic who has been homeless since 1985, has lost at least one homeless friend to the elements and even had a close call of his own once.

"I think God was looking out for me that night," Vallee said of a night he spent in a tent in weather that was below zero in the double digits.

"I had one blanket. I got up in the morning, and I couldn't walk. I felt paralyzed," he said.

Vallee was one of three homeless people who showed up to the vigil. Also attending was Dan Kovich, 47, who is going on his third year of chronic homeless in the city.

Kovich, who was planning to spend the night in a nearby shelter, said he was making more than \$33 an hour when he lost his job two and half years ago.

Kovich, who has had a prosthetic leg for most of his life and said he suffers from major bi-polar disorder and panic attacks, credits his "street survival skills" for getting him through the hardest days and nights.

"Knowing how to get a free meal, sleeping in laundromats," he explained.

Panhandling is an act of desperation, Kovich said, since people often ignore it.

Like many of the participants of the vigil, Kovich said the city needs more programs to help the homeless and the conditions that often cause homelessness.

The brief vent of frustration prompted Kovich to expel a deep sigh.

"The name of the game is survival," he said. "It's hard being homeless."

Stephanie Hooper can be reached at 594-6413 or shooper@nashuatelegraph.com.

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