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Homeless Person's Memorial Day

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By

Published on 12/22/2007 in [Home](#) » [Editorial](#) » [Perspective](#)

Today is the first day of winter. It is the shortest day, and the longest night of the year.

At the start of every winter since 1990, the National Homeless Coalition has sponsored National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, to bring the tragedy of homelessness to public attention and to remember our friends who have paid the ultimate penalty for our nation's failure to end homelessness.

On Friday, on the lawn and steps in front of the First Congregational Church, New London held its first (but not its last) such act of community remembrance. A brief service of prayers, a reading from the prophet Isaiah, a candlelight vigil and the naming of those who have died homeless in recent times, took place at the corner of State and Union streets, across from City Hall.

This public witness, sponsored by the New London Homeless Hospitality Center Inc. and St. Francis House, was a time to quietly reflect and sing a song of peace. All of our citizens are welcome to share this time, and invited to think about what it means to be homeless in New London.

Last year saw the production of the "Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness in Southeastern Connecticut," and Carol Walter, who led the coalition that brought that work to fruition, spoke at Friday's event.

At least four of our friends have died homeless in the past two years, and the purpose of our gathering is to remember them in the same way other people remember their family and friends — with sadness, but also with joy, that they have graced our lives.

Let's not cast blame

The event was not an occasion to assign blame for these tragic deaths. The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "In a democracy, some are guilty, but all are responsible." The people of New London have given generously of their time and money to support our homeless shelter and the work to obtain medical and other benefits, jobs and housing for homeless people through the Homeless Hospitality Center.

The Grassroots Homeless Coalition, working with First Congregational Church, provides breakfast five days a week. All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation and Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana provide showers. The Community Meal Center, sometimes known as "the soup kitchen," has provided meals twice a day, six days a week, for more than 20 years. The Salvation Army still does its wonderful work, and the original homeless shelter, the Covenant Shelter, continues to thrive.

Numbers are hard to come by with the homeless population. There are more than 2 million homeless in our country; 30,000 people experience homelessness each year in Connecticut; and the Homeless Hospitality Center (shelter at St. James Episcopal Church and drop-in center at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation) has seen more than 500 different individuals in the past 12 months. Some are with us for a while and return to family or other housing. Some stay with us for longer times.

Most people become homeless in America because of poverty. They often have jobs, but don't earn enough for both housing and food. Or they experience homelessness for a brief period, because of job loss or family troubles. But the cruel fact is that people who earn less than \$14 an hour in New London County cannot afford housing in our region. It is not true that "all of us are just one paycheck away from homelessness." Only some of us are. But the homeless are also "us."

New London is a richer city for the presence of our homeless neighbors. It is important that we honor them in life as well as when they die.

The Rev. Emmett Jarrett, TSSF, lives and works at St. Francis House in New London. He is vice president of the board of the New London Homeless Hospitality Center, Inc.

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