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Memorial services remember deceased homeless

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PINELLAS COUNTY - For the first time ever, Pinellas County will observe National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day on Dec. 21.

Interfaith memorial services are planned in municipalities throughout Pinellas County to remember those who died while experiencing homelessness. These 30-minute memorial services, coordinated by the Pinellas County Coalition for the Homeless (PCCH), will feature readings from diverse sacred scriptures, music by local choral groups such as the Alumni Singers, eulogies on the theme "A Time to Remember," and candlelight remembrances of the deceased. Proclamations from Pinellas County Board of Commissioners and the cities of Clearwater, Largo, St. Petersburg and Tarpon Springs will also be presented. Community leaders such as St. Petersburg City Council Chairman James Bennett and Frank Murphy III, President of Catholic Charities, Diocese of St. Petersburg will bring remarks. Free hot meals will be served after each service to provide opportunities for homeless consumers, service providers, advocates, community leaders and others to share a meal together in celebration of the lives of those who once walked among us.

An number of agencies worked together to plan the services, including St. Anthony's Hospital, the Diocese of St. Petersburg and Religious Community Services, Inc. The entire community is invited to attend memorial services to be held in the following locations:

Far North County, Thursday, Dec. 20, 4:30 p.m., St. Timothy Lutheran Church, 812 E. Tarpon Ave., Tarpon Springs.

North County, Friday, Dec. 21, 11 a.m., St. Cecelia Catholic Church, 820 Jasmine Way, Clearwater

Mid County, Friday, Dec. 21, 6 p.m., Pinellas Hope, 5726 126th Ave. N., Clearwater

South County, Friday, Dec. 21, 6 p.m., St. Vincent de Paul, 401 15th St. N., St. Petersburg.

Each year since 1990, on or near the first day of winter and the longest night of the year, the National Coalition for the Homeless has sponsored National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day to bring attention to the tragedy of homelessness and to remember homeless neighbors who have paid the ultimate price for our nation's failure to end homelessness.

Beginning in 2005, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council and the National Consumer Advisory Board joined as co-sponsors. Last year, more than sixty cities conducted Memorial Day events on or around December 21.

Homelessness is a growing problem in Pinellas County. According to the annual Point-In-Time count and survey conducted by PCCH in January, there are about 5,195 people who are not living in their own homes in Pinellas County - and increase of 10.5 percent over 2006. Of this amount, 18.5 percent are children and 1,221 adults and children were living in the streets.

The increased number of homeless people, including families with children, has placed more demands on the limited number of shelter beds currently available the county. As a result, these county residents may end up sleeping in the streets, doubled-up with friends or relatives or residing in unsafe structures not suitable for habitation.

Homelessness dramatically elevates one's risk of illness, injury and death. The average age of death of homeless persons is about 50 years, the age at which Americans commonly died in 1900, according to Dr. Jim O'Connell in an article on premature mortality in homeless populations. Today, non-homeless Americans can expect to live to age 78.

Among the many homeless persons to be memorialized, many mourners will remember two homeless men who were murdered this year in St. Petersburg on Jan. 17. David Heath and Jeff Schultz, both residents of Pinellas County, were murdered in separate incidents blocks away from a "tent city" destroyed by St. Petersburg police five

days earlier. The murders were a reminder of the prevalence of violent crimes against the homeless and the difficulties and dangers faced by them.

In an effort to get more homeless people off the streets this winter, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of St. Petersburg is operating a temporary outdoor shelter called "Pinellas Hope" in an unincorporated area of the County just north of Pinellas Park. About 250 homeless adults will be housed in two-man tents and have access to hot meals, showers and toilet facilities, case management and transportation.

The Pinellas County Coalition for the Homeless Inc. is the county-wide organization charged with coordinating services to homeless individuals and families, generating revenues to help fund homeless services programs, and providing information and education to the general public about homelessness in the county. We are a membership organization, with more than 40 organizations and public agencies working together to address the needs of the homeless.

For more information, call 727-528-5763.

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