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Cassidy: Homeless death toll reflects awful reality about valley

By Mike Cassidy
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For five minutes, in a brilliantly sunny courtyard, those who help the poor read the names of the homeless who had died in Santa Clara County in the past year.

Seventy-one names.

Black, white, Latino, Asian. Men, women. One was 27 years old. Another was 67. No doubt few had loved ones around when they died. Some died alone. All alone.

"It's sad," Margie Matthews, the county's affordable housing director told me before the ceremony. "We're sort of commemorating the sadness of their lives, not just the sadness of their deaths."

And for awhile I was fixated on the number - 71. Twenty three more than last year. Many more than any year since 1999, when the annual memorial at San Jose-based EHC LifeBuilders began.

How could that be?

People from EHC and the county and Invision and other agencies offered theories. Medical and mental health care cutbacks could mean sicker people on the street. The chronic homeless population, the stubborn and bewildered who resist help, are getting older and when people get older . . . well.

And they also offered an explanation: Counting the homeless, dead or alive, is not an exact science. It's unlikely the same methodology has always been used. This year, the county coroner provided 43 of the names - people who most likely died on the streets.

The rest came from homeless service agencies that sent names to EHC - some of those folks may have been in transitional housing

or even permanent subsidized apartments.

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And then it struck me. Maybe this isn't about numbers at all. Maybe this is about that this happens at all. That people die on the streets. Our streets. Streets that for so many are paved in gold.

It's an awful reality that we live in a place known for mind-boggling innovation and heart-stopping success stories, a place where the beauty of a problem is that it can be solved. And yet it's a place where people live - and too often die - in parks and under bridges and in the doorways of downtown high-rises.

"The overall issue is that it's horrible," said Chris Block, executive director of Charities Housing, a non-profit developer of affordable housing. "It's so unacceptable that anybody dies on the streets in Santa Clara County."

But they do. They die violently. At least two of the 71 were shot to death. Another was stabbed, another was beaten. They are hit by cars. They bring on their own slow deaths by cirrhosis and other complications from

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A group in attendance included homeless as well as those who work for... (KAREN T. BORCHERS)

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alcoholism. Some end it quickly with suicide. They die sometimes with no one to care.

You've read about some of these unfortunate 71. Cornelius Van Der Vies died at Market and Santa Clara streets after a skirmish with another homeless man. John Carl Riggins was beaten and strangled, and he died in a Willow Glen alley. Charles Krinard was stabbed in a room on Fourth Street. Margaret Fay was shot near San Fernando Street and Almaden Boulevard.

Others you don't know.

"How do their friends and people who cared for them have a chance to honor them if not through something like this?" Jennifer Loving, EHC's interim chief executive, asked before the ceremony.

About 120 sat and stood in the courtyard of the emergency housing center known as the Boccardo Regional Reception Center. They stared at 71 small flickering candles. Many were those who worked with the homeless. Some were homeless themselves. Some came to mourn a social condition, others to mourn a friend.

Robert Vega was there to honor Elvia Garcia Navio, a woman he said he'd been planning to marry. She died in September after suddenly becoming ill, Vega said.

"We were inseparable," Vega, 40, said. "She was like my shadow. I was like her shadow."

A poster on the table next to the lectern bore the names of the dead. Social workers spoke. A pastor prayed for those with "dreams not accomplished."

Representatives from Invision, the Salvation Army, San Jose Family Shelter, the Palo Alto Downtown Streets Team, the county coroner and others who'd do anything to not have to read any names next year, slowly spoke them aloud - one by one.

A solemn quiet hung in the warm air between one name and the next.

And when the names were finished, Hilary Barroga, an EHC administrator, somberly started singing "Amazing Grace," as a few in the crowd joined her. Then more. Then louder.

And then each was left with his or her thoughts as the quiet set back in.

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