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Invisible in life, remembered in death

A memorial service honors those who died homeless and mostly unnoticed.

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ST. PETERSBURG- They gathered to say goodbye to the men and women they had never really known.

There was a moment of silence and a reading from the Gospel of Matthew. But there were no eulogies for the homeless men and women who died on the street.

"Their loved ones probably don't even know that they're dead," said Karen Elton, 49, of the men and women she had slept near on public sidewalks and in parks but did not know by name.

She grew silent.

"If something was to happen to me," she said as tears rolled down her face, "my family would not know. They wouldn't know I was dead."

She began to cry harder.

More than 60 homeless people gathered Friday at the St. Vincent de Paul Center in St. Petersburg to observe National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day.

Pinellas Park, Tarpon Springs, Clearwater and Tampa held similar ceremonies. It was the first time Pinellas County observed the holiday.

At St. Vincent de Paul, the Rev. Phil Miller-Evans of the American Baptist Church of Beatitudes in St. Petersburg chided the handful of city officials in attendance. Kind words of remembrance are nice, he said, but action is better.

"What goes on the death certificate is murder or they had poor health," he said. "But the ones we are mentioning tonight ... they died of homelessness."

A year ago, the homeless slept outside St. Vincent de Paul in a makeshift city of tents.

Then two of their own - David Heath, 53, and Jeff Schultz, 43 - were shot and killed nine blocks from each other Jan. 17. Less than two days later, St. Petersburg police officers slashed more than 20 tents outside St. Vincent de Paul.

At the ceremony Friday, the Rev. Bruce Wright of Refuge Ministries asked those in attendance to read with him a litany of remembrance.

"With grateful hearts we remember them now: David Heath and Gary Yansen," Wright began.

"In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them," the crowd replied, reading along.

"Jeff Schultz and Wilson Spicer," Wright continued.

"As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us," came the response.

"James Potter and Virgil Hughes," Wright said.

"We remember them when we are weary and in need of strength," the crowd said.

Wright went on, listing the names of those who had died without a place to call home. Charles Cummings, Ramon Roiq, Michael Foley, Dennis Grimm, Kenneth White, James Free and Dana Meyer.

"We remember those who have died whose names we do not know," Wright concluded.

"As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us," the crowd responded. "We remember them."

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