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Vigil for homeless who died on streets

BY PETER BAILEY

Angel Gomez. Betty Sweeting. Shawn Lewis.

As the names were read at a ceremony inside Miami-Dade's government center Friday evening, Charlie Canova shook her head, seemingly oblivious to the passersby in the busy transportation hub.

Her gaze fell to the floor when Infant Blunt was announced. "No baby should die without a home," said Canova, 59. "Not in America."

That sentiment drew a crowd of more than 200 to a memorial service for homeless people who died in Miami-Dade over the past year.

They held a candlelight vigil for those left wandering at their last breath. They sang carols and recited poems inside the center, where hundreds of drifters can be found sleeping on flattened cardboard boxes in the courtyard on any given night. In all, 94 names were read, a homeless death toll up from 64 last year, according to the county medical examiner's office. In Broward, where 67 homeless people died this year, advocates held a similar ceremony at First Baptist Church.

Advocates for the homeless throughout other U.S. cities held similar memorials as part of 'National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day,' part of a burgeoning movement to address the issues facing the homeless.

Miami-Dade County's homeless population numbers about 1,600, down from 7,000 in 1993, according to the Miami-Dade Homeless Trust. About 407 are labeled chronic -- homeless for more than year -- down from 831 in 2005. Officials with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development announced Friday that more than \$69 million will go toward homeless programs throughout Florida in the upcoming year.

About 70 Miami-Dade programs will receive \$24.2 million; \$7.7 million will go to Broward programs, officials said. But advocates at Friday's vigil said this year's increase in deaths shows the uphill battle they face in eliminating homelessness.

"We continue to find it unacceptable that there is a list at all," said David Raymond, executive director of the Trust.

Two babies were on the list -- Infant Blunt and Infant Stafford -- alongside a number of others whose causes of death were listed as accidental or natural. The oldest person to die on the streets in recent memory -- 86-year old Shirley Sammons -- was also listed.

Teodoro Aguilar, 49, Carlos Rivera, 44, and 35-year old Lela Overton's deaths were listed as victims of violence. The average age at death was 51. "It's getting worse on the streets for our most vulnerable population," said Ben Burton, head of the Miami Homeless Coalition. "Miami's homeless population is getting older . . . eventually you get worn down."

A recent report shows that Florida has one of the highest rates of violence against the homeless in the country. Burton also cited poor access to healthcare as a factor in the increased mortality rate.

In response, the city of Miami's outreach team recently has added a late-night shift to its schedule to transport drifters to shelters. In Broward, a program called Operation Lifesaver tries to prevent drifters from sleeping near train tracks, where many are killed.

For now, Canoza, who volunteered to usher at Friday's ceremony, hopes the names resonate with someone.

"Everyone deserves some dignity . . . even if they died under a bridge," she said.

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