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Vigil remembers those who died homeless

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Jeffrey Orteig was a helpful, loving man, but he sometimes struggled with mental health issues and occasionally thought it best to stay away from his family.

Those breaks, relatives said, most recently included a six-month period of homelessness. And although he had recently found a place to live, he spent most of his limited money on housing. He was trying a new medication, which appeared to worsen his condition, when he took his own life in July, relatives said.

Orteig's family, including his widow and two daughters, on Friday evening came to the Homeless Persons' Memorial Day event, held at Millennium Plaza in Yakima.

About 50 spectators attended; organizers noted the irony that several homeless people who were interested in being there instead had to catch a bus to a cold-weather shelter for the night.

Kathy Orteig said she attended in her husband's memory "to honor him, to let him know that someone loved him."

Orteig, 50, was among five homeless people whose deaths over the past year were remembered at the event, which has been held for the past three years by the Homeless Network of Yakima County. The others were Fred Harkins, 45; Sandy Knight, 40; Thomas Schroeder, 63; and Vance Zink, 53.

Kathy Orteig said better access to mental health care would have helped her husband. The story is the same for a significant number of the more than 1,000 homeless people in Yakima County. The estimated population comes from an annual count, which will be repeated Jan. 24, said Beth Dannhardt, chairwoman of the homeless network.

Other key issues are drug and alcohol use and a lack of affordable housing.

The network's partners have made progress. A drop-in day center opened this fall in Wapato thanks to a community nonprofit organization. David Hacker of Wapato, who purchased the building that will eventually be turned into an overnight shelter, said eight to 15 homeless people are spending the night at the nearby Campbell Farm, a church mission.

Harker said he named the shelter Noah's Ark in memory of his late wife, Sheri Noah, the farm's director.

"I wanted to do this because I didn't want people dying in the streets this winter," Harker said.

But more needs to be done, particularly in the area of affordable housing, Dannhardt said. The reasons are both pragmatic and humanitarian.

The cost to the social service system is high, but the homeless deserve a chance for a better life.

"They're people with needs and dreams just like everybody else, and they all have the potential to be something more than homeless," Dannhardt said.

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