

Remembering the homeless

By ALANA LISTOE - Independent Record - 12/20/07

Thirteen people living homeless have died in Helena this year. Gerard Fortin, otherwise known in homeless circles around the nation as "Frog," was with two of them when they passed.

"In fact, I just buried two in the last two weeks," he said. "They died 12 hours apart, and it's still really tough for me."

Frog flashes a warm smile at everyone he meets along the way, and the twinkle in his eye makes it nearly impossible not to smile back. He is a slender, generous man who religiously takes a moment to pause and say hello.

After jumping box cars in railroad yards and living on the streets for more than 30 years, Frog, 57, considers himself very familiar with the homeless community. He will be speaking at a memorial service planned for Friday, Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, at Women's Park at noon.

The event will honor the 13 people who died while homeless or have recently been homeless in Helena. One was Jesse Stephenson, who passed away in July from leukemia. He was 44. Another was Mary Fields who died just a few weeks ago. She was known as "Scary Mary" because, Frog said, she spoke her words without holding anything back.

Frog is an advocate for the homeless. On Friday he'll touch on topics such as health care for the homeless, having more compassion for the young street kids and single homeless women without children and the void of a place for them to find shelter. He'll also talk about how agencies view and handle homelessness, which he describes as "a person who has absolutely no means to get by."

Frog said society places too much red tape on the homeless when they're looking for services. Those in need shouldn't have to jump through so many hoops to get their basic needs met, he said.

The general public has misconceptions about the homeless, Frog said.

"People tend to stereotype the homeless as bums," he said, adding that most people just pass them by without even a glance. "They are touched when you say hello to them, but 99 percent of the time, you don't respond, you just walk on by."

Friday marks the official beginning of winter and is designated as Homeless Persons Memorial Day. Helena joins 100 cities around the nation holding ceremonies. Billings held a ceremony earlier this month; Missoula is holding one Thursday commemorating more than two dozen people statewide.

A survey conducted almost a year ago identified 2,217 Montanans who are homeless, according to a guest editorial written by Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger. However, he goes on to say that the number represented in the survey is just the tip of the iceberg because many living homeless fall under the radar.

Michael Stoops with the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C., estimates the number of homeless in Montana is around 1,343, and 744,313 on any given night throughout the country. The number of homeless who have died is much harder to determine.

"We really don't know how many homeless there are in the U.S.," he said. "So therefore there is no scientific way to calculate who had died."

Some homeless persons who have died go unnoticed. These scheduled vigils are way to remember them. Stoops said often they aren't in touch with loved ones and are cremated with no services.

"This is our way to remember those who have died that are homeless," he said.

The names of all 13 people who died this year in Helena will be read at the ceremony.

Sherrie Downing, coordinator of the Governor's Council on Homelessness said it's tough to be confident that number is accurate.

A survey administered in January by the Montana Continuum of Care Coalition, local providers of homeless services and many volunteers who canvassed areas where the homeless are often found (points of service such as food banks, transitional housing programs, shelters, streets, parks, campgrounds and others) found 350 people homeless on Jan. 31.

"But that is just a point-in-time snapshot and probably doesn't come close to reflecting the real number of people who are homeless because lots of people bounce in and out of homelessness throughout the year, and lots of people are impossible to locate for a survey like this," Downing said.

He knows he's one of the lucky ones, because tonight he'll be sleeping in an apartment he's rented downtown.

Memorial service

Friday is Homeless Persons' Memorial Day honoring those who have died while homeless or recently homeless in 2007, and a memorial service is set for noon at Women's Park on Fuller Avenue. For more information call Sherrie Downing, coordinator of the Governor's Council on Homelessness at 443-0580.

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