

Stamford joins effort to raise awareness of the homeless

By Monica Potts
Staff Writer

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STAMFORD - Statistics on homeless deaths can be difficult to gather, but studies estimate fatality rates four to six times higher than for other people.

The average age of death among homeless people is about 50, almost 30 years lower than the general population, according to John Lozier, executive director for the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

Tonight, Stamford is participating for the first time in National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, an event formally organized in 1990 to honor those who had died.

"I worked at a clinic at that time, and we had to bury a number of people who had no families to remember them," said Lozier, whose organization co-sponsors the day with the National Coalition for the Homeless. "We wanted to provide people a little bit of the dignity that everybody wants in death, and call attention to the tragic circumstances that result in incredibly elevated mortality rates."

Optimus Health Care Inc. and the Shelter for the Homeless are organizing poetry readings, speakers and musical performances, which begin at 6 p.m. at the Community Tabernacle of Deliverance at 432 Fairfield Ave.

The organization decided to host the event this year because of the growing number of homeless in lower Fairfield County, said Jerome Roberts, an associate shelter director.

"We need to let people in southwest Connecticut understand that we have a real issue here that is not going away," he said.

Roberts pointed to a recent study that shows more than half of the homeless persons served by area shelters are employed. Lack of affordable housing is a big problem, he said.

"It's just becoming more and more to the point that who we are sheltering these days are the working poor," he said.

Lack of housing makes people especially vulnerable to illness, Lozier said.

A number of factors contribute to increased likelihood that homeless individuals will die, including exposure to elements, crowded conditions in shelters in which diseases can easily spread, and lack of health care, Lozier said.

Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, said her organization participates in the event in Washington, D.C.

She said it is important for raising community awareness.

"The solution is to get people into housing and make sure they have health care," Roman said. "It really is disgraceful in a country with the resources it has that people are living on the street."

The events are always held on the first day of winter, the longest night of the year.

"People seem to be sensitive to what it means to be dark and cold and alone," Lozier said. "It's also the time when the season is changing, when the days begin to get longer and we can experience, even in the face of outrageous death, some sense of change."

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