

Ceremony honors 2007's homeless victims

LINDA CONNER LAMBECK llambeck@ctpost.com

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BRIDGEPORT — Braving Friday's cold weather, the way the homeless do every day, about 100 people huddled in front of Homes for the Brave to remember homeless people who died in the city during 2007.

They remembered Daniel, Jeffrey, John and Joseph. Also Tom, Mack, John P. and Bill.

As the names were called, red, white and blue carnations were placed in a wreath.

A military honor guard, flags snapping in the wind, stood at attention in front of the shelter for homeless veterans at 655 Park Ave. Taps was played.

The noon ceremony drew about 100 dignitaries, military and the public. Hosted by Homes for the Brave and the Southwest Community Health Center, the program also was an opportunity to distribute free coats and to educate.

Of the nation's estimated 3.5 million homeless, as many as one in four are veterans, said Rich DeNisco, coordinator of health care for homeless at the health center. It's believed there are 33,000 people in Connecticut with no place to live. The last time a homeless census was done in Bridgeport, the number reached 1,400. DeNisco thinks that count was low.

This is the third year that National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day was observed locally, a date traditionally observed on or close to the first day of winter, which this year is today.

"It strikes me what a shame that we have to deal with an issue called homelessness," said Katherine Yacavone, president and chief executive officer of Southwest. "Housing should be a right. Health care should be a right. No one person should die for lack of shelter."

State Sen. John McKinney, R-Fairfield, who a few days ago proposed a \$17 million plan to build supportive housing, affordable housing and tax credits aimed at eradicating homelessness in the state, also spoke.

"I'm not charting a course, you are," he told the audience. "Enough is enough. We can end homelessness. We should be ashamed to let this continue to happen."

McKinney said the state should not wait for the federal government to act. He said federal efforts to attack the homeless problem — made 20 years ago after his father, the late U.S. Rep. Stuart McKinney, died — were envisioned as a first step. "It turned out to be the only step," he said.

Joy Kiss, executive director of Homes for the Brave, said her 33-bed facility has served 452 homeless men in the past five years, 405 of who once wore a military uniform.

"We owe it to soldiers who put lives on lines to take care of them," she said.

One is Michael Hasselbacher, who read the proclamation sent by U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4, at the ceremony.

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A Navy veteran who now lives in Milford, Hasselbacher, 57, spent 15 months at Homes for the Brave between January 2005 and May 2006. A recovering alcoholic,



Patriot Guard Rider Al Beck attends the National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day ceremony at the Homes for the Brave in Bridgeport. Southwest Community Health Center and Homes for the Brave held the ceremony to honor Bridgeport homeless citizens who died in 2007. (B.K. Angeletti/For the Connecticut Post)

Hasselbacher said he was referred to the facility after becoming unemployed, broke and homeless. Homes for the Brave gave him vocational counseling, shelter, food and health care.

"Life happens. Because of my circumstances, I was on a downward spiral. Homes for the Brave put me back on my feet and restored me to independent living," he said.

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