

Homeless Deaths in Santa Cruz

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Heroin is rampant in Santa Cruz and the swath it is cutting through the population is truly frightening. Heroin is a very good painkiller. When you are homeless, you are in pain a lot. It almost seems like the natural thing to do for awhile. A chance to step out of the pain, the fear, and the stress of being homeless that makes you just hurt all the time. Heroin is like a little vacation from it all. Nothing hurts.

One death was a suicide. Why should they think the suffering of homelessness is going to end? We don't even have a way for a person who is really trying to overcome their homelessness to be able to do so. Why should they go on living? What do they have to look forward to?

One death was a homicide. Did you read about it in the paper? Me neither. Usually the homicide angle is enough for reporters to play up the sensational angle of a story. But you're expected to die when you're homeless. It is so normal it's not news, even when it's murder. In fact we can even blame it on the homeless victims of these frequent assaults and acts of violence. Don't they know how dangerous it is to live out of doors? Whatever were they thinking in deciding to move under a bridge to live?

The causes of death in descending order were: Acute Overdose—7; Cancer—5; Trauma—3; Liver disease—2; Stroke—2; Infection—2; GI bleeding—1; Homicide—1; Suicide—1; unknown—1.

Mayor Christopher Krohn and his mother attended the ceremony and read a prepared statement. They left quickly, even before the reading of the names. No other member of the Santa Cruz City Council attended.

Last year, 41 names were read. The year before it was 19. The toll goes on.

The overdoses, homicides, and suicides are all preventable causes of death. This year we had nine preventable deaths; if services had been adequate to their needs, they might still be alive.

When does the crisis of homelessness trigger for us, as a society, a commitment to act to end that emergency? Just as the Red Cross refused to come to the aid of the homeless residents of Camp Paradise when the flood waters were rising and washing out their meager homes, so we are failing to respond to the crisis these 29 people had on our very doorsteps.

We, as a society, must pay for housing for all of our elderly.

We, as a society, must pay for housing for anyone who is in the final stages of the ravages of disease, so they can have proper nursing care during their last days.

We, as a society, must pay for housing for anyone who is too disabled to work.

We, as a society, must pay for drug rehabilitation facilities to help addicted people. They can't clean up while still on the street, or it is very likely they will relapse.

Why hasn't the Santa Cruz County Department of Health declared a public health emergency caused by homelessness? We have more than enough statistical evidence to declare one. If it were deaths from Anthrax poisoning we would get excited. We would do something.

For more information, contact HUFF, Homeless United for Friendship & Freedom, at (831) 423-HUFF for a 24-hour voicemail and regularly updated message on homelessness in Santa Cruz. E-mail Becky Johnson at: becky_johnson@sbcglobal.net