

Santa Cruz Holds Memorial for 41 Homeless Deaths

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— Ken Cole, Homeless Services Center

by Becky Johnson

Two employees of the Homeless Services Center (HSC) both homeless themselves, read the names of the dead to memorialize the passage of homeless people who had died in the past year in Santa Cruz. The list was prepared by the Homeless Persons Health Project as part of the National Coalition on Homelessness's annual "Day of Remembrance," held on December 21, 2000. Last year in Santa Cruz, 19 names were read. On this day, the number was 41.

HSC Executive Director Ken Cole addressed the gathering of the homeless and the housed by saying, "The first reason we are gathered here is to read the names, so people are not forgotten, and so that we as a community can recognize the loss and so we can personally process the loss."

Men in long, scruffy beards, and a woman in a wheelchair moved closer to listen above the drone of the nearby freeway traffic on this cold morning. Cole continued, "The second reason is to raise awareness that this should stop, that people should not die without housing, that people should not die in the undignified setting that they often die in. It needs to stop. We need housing; we need treatment. We need a lot of things to get people off of the streets. This memorial is being done around the country in many, many cities. This is our piece of it."

Unlike last year, the Homeless Persons Health Project (HPHP) made a coordinated effort to track homeless deaths with other social services agencies, as well as with the County Health Services Agency and the Public Administrators' Office. Data was collected on cause of death, age at death, and area where the body was found. Although the number of homeless people who died this year, 41, is over twice the number reported last year, it is commonly accepted that neither last year's count nor this year's count is definitive.

Thirty-seven of the names were officially verified. Of these deaths, 34 were male and three were female. Six were between 21 years and 30 years of age. The largest group, 19, were between the ages of 41 and 50. Only one person of the 41 who died was over 70 years of age. The major cause of death, acute overdose due to alcohol or drugs, claimed 11 lives. Eight people died from chronic substance use. However, can-

cer, liver disease, HIV, and pneumonia all claimed lives. Three died of trauma. Two were officially listed as suicides.

Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice, along with former mayor, Celia Scott, attended the ceremony, but did not speak. With the sound of freeway traffic as a backdrop, Cole spoke with members of the press. He told them, "There are more deaths than last year. The death rate reflects the hyperactive housing market and that people are increasingly forced to sleep in their cars and camp out. There are just more people struggling with maintaining housing in this community."

Matt Nathanson of the HPHP, who had known many of the dead personally, said: "There's 37 homeless people who died over the last year and that means three people per month. That in and of itself is a lot. Most of them are men. Most of them tend to be in the 30-50 year age range, which is young for people to die. Also, a large number of the deaths were related to overdose or long-term substance abuse which reminds me of the need for more substance abuse treatment facilities in the County of all types."

One death, on November 11, 2000, has been a rallying cry for activists. "Boxer" Billy Denson, a legless man in a wheelchair, died of apparent hypothermia in a carport in the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz. The winter shelter program at the National Guard Armory did not open until

November 15, four days after he died. Another death, Michael "Barefoot" Richards, occurred from a fall into a ravine in Twin Lakes Park. Barefoot had lived in the park for years, having built a little shack in a remote area of the park until the rangers found it and destroyed it.

Heroin overdoses in Santa Cruz prompted the Homeless Issues Task Force to recommend a policy in which, if a person overdoses, and those present call 911 and stay with the victim until help arrives, they would not be prosecuted for IV drug use. The policy was summarily rejected by the City Council in June of 2000. According to Jan Tice, executive director of Janus, the only drug treatment facility in Santa Cruz which accepts indigent homeless clients, their program only has bedspace for one homeless person at a time.

Ken Cole closed the memorial service with a call to action, "There's always the message of compassion, tolerance, and more importantly, the message of action. We need to create housing. We need to create alcohol and drug treatment programs. We need to get people in off the streets. Stop blaming them and get on with the business of getting them back into our community."

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