

County recognizes homeless who died

Homeless - 2000
 Homeless Memorial will honor the 36 men and women who died this year

By PETER BRAND
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SANTA CRUZ— An average of three people die homeless each month in Santa Cruz County.

So far this year, 33 men and three women succumbed to substance abuse, suicide, cancer and HIV.

That's twice as many deaths as reported last year, advocates for the homeless say.

The advocates and health-care providers want to end the problem, beginning with increased awareness and focused efforts to bring the homeless off the streets, they say.

Today, the second annual Homeless Memorial Ceremony will honor the 36 homeless men and women who died this year. At the vigil, slated for 10 a.m., all their names will be read.

"This has been a particularly brutal year," said Ken Cole, director of the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz.

Higher housing costs, driving more people out of homes and onto the street where they are more susceptible to illness, have likely led to the increase, Cole said.

In many cases, common respiratory ailments turn fatal for the homeless, Becky Johnson said. In her four years with the Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom, a civil rights advocacy group, the number of homeless deaths "has been creeping up."

"These people need a place they can go to recover if they get a cold or the flu," Johnson said.

At the Santa Cruz County Homeless Persons Health Project, the perils of living on the street hit home every day.

"We want (the rest of the county) to know that," said Paul Gendreau, a public health nurse with the project.

A quarter of the county's homeless people were born and raised here.

Case in point: "Boxer" Billy Denson. He was a Navy veteran, a former brakeman for the Union Pacific Railroad and called the streets of Santa Cruz home for a decade. His body was found in Beach Flats Nov. 11. The cause of his death is under investigation.

"People are not coming from everywhere to be homeless" in Santa Cruz, Johnson said.

Nationwide, about 130 homeless health-care organizations will participate in similar ceremonies to remember the homeless.

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If you go

What: Second annual Homeless Memorial Ceremony

Where: Homeless Community Resource Center, 115 Coral St.

When: 10 a.m. today.

Why: To raise awareness.

'This has been a particularly brutal year,' said homeless service director Ken Cole; higher housing costs are driving more people out of homes and onto the street. In many cases, common respiratory ailments turn fatal for those without homes.