



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Lois Alford's son was among the 42 homeless people who died in the county this year.

Homeless deaths spike in past year

Rise due in part to four homicides

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SANTA CRUZ — Forty-two homeless people died in Santa Cruz County in 2006, the most since social service providers began keeping statistics in 2001.

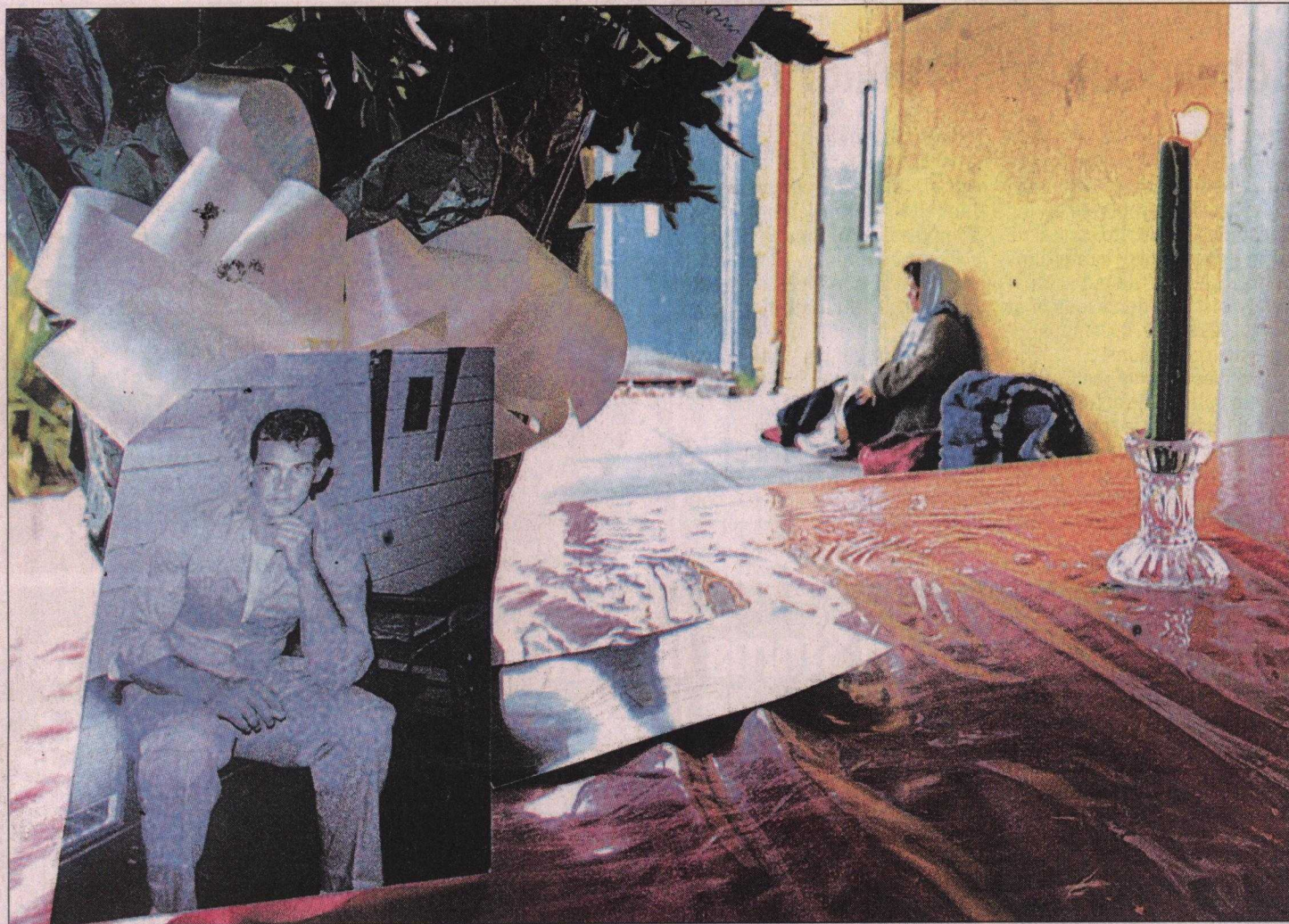
Four were homicide victims, all at the hands of other homeless people, according to law enforcement agencies.

"It was a brutal year," said Ken Cole, executive director of the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz. "This speaks to how desperate people are, how on edge people are. It speaks to our need to get people off the streets. ... We're kind of going backwards."

According to a census taken last year, there are 3,370 people without permanent housing in the county. Since the annual count began, an average of 32 people have died each year, according to figures released by the Santa Cruz County Homeless Persons' Health Project. Last year, there were 29 deaths. There were no homeless homicides in either

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LOIS ALFORD,
MOTHER OF
HOMELESS MAN
WHO DIED IN
NOVEMBER



ABOVE: A picture memorializing Allen Eugene Knight — a homeless man who died on the streets earlier this year — graces a table at a memorial service while a homeless woman sits with her possessions outside the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz on Thursday.

RIGHT: Candles are lit memorializing homeless people who have died in the past year during a ceremony Thursday at the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos



Homeless

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2004 or 2005, according to authorities.

County figures show chronic liver disease and other drug- and alcohol-related ailments were leading causes of death in 2006. The average age at death was 49.

"The average person is getting so numb to this," Cole said. "People are getting to accept that this is just part of our society. It should be something that shocks people."

Larry Turnell was 53 when he died in November from a medical condition related to his substance abuse problems. His mother, Lois Alford, clutched a picture of her son as a young boy as she sobbed her way through a ceremony Thursday at the Homeless Services Center on Coral Street honoring all homeless people who died this year. The memorial, an annual event since 1999, is held Dec. 21 — the shortest day and longest night of the year. About 50 people endured a dank and dreary afternoon to honor the dead on National Homeless Day.

"I just wish more people could be connected with it so they know how many people are out there who need help," Alford said. "If people could know what it's like to lose a child, no matter what age ... the regrets about what you might have done or could have done."

Cole described the ceremony as closure for homeless people and those who work with them.

"There's grief that goes with this kind of work and it's a chance to step away from some of that pain and reaffirm our desire to end homelessness and get people off the streets," he said. "Ultimately, people should not die in the bushes."

David DeLong, known to his friends as "Gypsy," died this year at age 64. His friend, Megan Colson, also homeless, gave a short eulogy in his honor, remembering the 20 years they were apart before reuniting a few months ago.

"I lost him and I found him," she said. "And I lost him again."

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