

NATIONAL HOMELESS PERSONS' MEMORIAL MANUAL

# National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day



Photo courtesy of Coordinated Assistance Ministries (CAM), Inc.

## Organizing Manual

Updated 2021

THE FIRST DAY OF WINTER, THE LONGEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR

# December 21:

The first day of winter, the longest night of the year

People in your community will die without a home this year. While we must try to prevent the loss of every life, we also need to recognize the reality of conditions that individuals experiencing homelessness face and plan to memorialize them on National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day.

In the past several years, hundreds of cities, representing more than 30 states and the District of Columbia, have participated in the National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day. As we emerge from the global pandemic, it is important to remember all those we lost and pledge to rebuild a strong social safety net for everyone residing in the United States. Let's make this a year of increased awareness by organizing even more memorial events across the nation.



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## Overview

Since 1990, the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) has sponsored National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day every year on December 21 – the first day of winter and the longest night of the year – to bring attention to the tragedy of homelessness and to remember those who have died while living without a permanent home. In 2005, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council and the National Consumer Advisory Board joined NCH as co-sponsors of this meaningful event.

In an effort to maximize the impact of the day, we encourage local and statewide organizations to hold memorials for the homeless individuals who have died in their communities that year. In 2019, over 200 Memorial Day events were held on or around December 21<sup>st</sup> to honor the people who died homeless. Events take place throughout December and are overseen by local coalitions, social service providers or religious institutions.

While most organizations have memorials around December 21<sup>st</sup>, this date is not required. You can hold a vigil any day of the year to remember those lost based on what works best for your community.

### ***What You Can Do***

1. **Get involved with a memorial service in your city:** A list of the year's Memorial Day Events, including contact information for local sponsors can be found at:  
[www.nationalhomeless.org/about-us/projects/memorial-day](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/about-us/projects/memorial-day)
2. **Organize your own event to commemorate those who have died** while living without a permanent home and **raise awareness** about the severity of homelessness.
3. **Record the names of people who died without housing during the year in your community.**  
In many places, homeless deaths are not tracked or recorded, so work with people who are homeless, service providers, and public officials to compile a list as best as possible.

### ***Resources***

This manual should serve as a resource to assist you in your efforts. If you have any additional questions, please contact either/both:

National Coalition for the Homeless  
(202) 462-4822  
[info@nationalhomeless.org](mailto:info@nationalhomeless.org)

National Health Care for the Homeless Council  
(615) 226-2292 [kcavanaugh@hchmd.org](mailto:kcavanaugh@hchmd.org)

## Planning Your Event

**Invite other organizations to participate in planning the event.** Local and statewide coalitions for the homeless, health care for the homeless projects, shelters, housing programs, service providers and outreach programs may all wish to participate. **People who have experienced/are currently experiencing homelessness should be incorporated** into these events at every stage.

Make sure to **tailor your local event to your own community**. Try to think creatively about ways to honor the memory of those who have died and ways to raise awareness about homelessness. Past events have included:

- Candlelight vigils
- Silent marches
- Graveside services
- Plays and performances
- Special religious services
- Public policy advocacy events
- Virtual memorials

Each of these events will look differently and require different preparations, but a basic checklist of organizing tasks for your events includes:

- Build or join a coalition with local partners and people experiencing homelessness.
- Decide upon the date, time, and location. Be sure to pay attention to any requirements like getting a permit and other logistics (events on or around December 21st are recommended.)
- Create an agenda and choose speakers accordingly. Having persons who have experienced homelessness speak on behalf of their experience is important.
- Market the event through fliers, press release, and social and traditional media.

All organizers are encouraged to work with their local health department, local homeless service providers, outreach teams and/or health care clinic/programs to identify the number of people who have died while homeless in the local area. Try to obtain the names and ages of each person. *A name-reading can be a powerful component of your ceremony, as could a moment of silence for each of the deceased.* Remember that births and deaths are public events and the names of those who die in a community are always public information typically printed in the major newspaper.

A full listing of this year's Memorial Day events is posted at [www.nationalhomeless.org/aboutus/projects/memorial-day/](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/aboutus/projects/memorial-day/). Consult the list Memorial Events for more ideas and examples.

### ***Hosting a Virtual Event***

As the Coronavirus pandemic continues to pose challenges for in-person events, virtual memorials are a way to honor those who have died without the risks of gathering in-person. Additionally, virtual memorials allow people who may not otherwise have been able to attend in-person, allowing your vigil to reach a broader audience. Virtual events bring their own set of challenges, so below are some recommendations to help as you plan your event:

- **Start collecting names early as the pandemic may make the process more difficult**
  - In addition to names, you can also collect people's photos to create a video with photographs and names to promote your memorial and highlight those your community has lost. This can also be shared during the memorial as names are read to add faces to the names.
- **Share the event information widely to increase attendance**
  - Send personal invitations to homeless service providers, consumer groups, and community allies. You can also ask community providers to stream the event in their communal spaces.
  - Create a Facebook Event to crowd source the audience. Some meeting platforms, like Zoom, also allow for streaming live to Facebook.
- **Determine the best platform to use based on your community's resources**
  - If your community members have access to smart phones, a virtual memorial on Zoom may be a great fit. You could use Zoom meetings if you want everyone to see each other, or Zoom webinars if you want to limit who is visible to the attendees. Zoom can also be used for video or audio, if people only have the ability to call in.
  - If smart phones are a limiting factor, consider how to hold a socially distant memorial that can be streamed online to encourage a hybrid event. Churches or auditoriums may have enough space to ensure attendees are seated 6 feet apart, with directions on the floor to facilitate one-way walking patterns and limit contact. For communities in warmer climates, outdoor memorials in parks could provide a more communal feel for individuals who have been isolated for a while.
- **Gather a team to support the event, including people to coordinate event logistics, facilitate/moderate the event, and help with technology issues.**
- **Consider how to engage participants during the event**
  - Encourage people to use the chat box function to share their experiences with those who we have lost or their feelings related to this grief.
  - Some online platforms allow for breakout sessions. This can be a way for people to be able to share stories and engage with one another in smaller groups that allow for more personal connections.

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- Focusing the event on eulogies and centering those we have lost can help make these virtual memorials as impactful as in-person remembrances.
- It is likely the list of names will not be complete. Consider leaving a moment of silence for all those whose names were not able to be collected or unmute attendees for people to share the names of others who have passed.
- **After the event please submit the names you read to the National Coalition for the Homeless. We intend to publish a national list a month after the memorials take place in the local community.**

For more lessons learned from previous virtual events see *Lessons on Hosting a Virtual Memorial* on the National HCH Council's Homeless Persons' Memorial Day page <https://nhchc.org/consumers/events/homeless-persons-memorial-day/>.

### ***Working with your Local Government***

In order to attract more attention to this year's Memorial Day, **work with your local city council, mayor, state legislature, or governor.** Encourage them to pass a proclamation or resolution that recognizes December 21<sup>st</sup> as National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day and describes homelessness as a continuing and serious issue that must be resolved. (See sample proclamation and resolution on pages 14-15).

### ***Working with Media***

Media coverage of homelessness usually reaches its peak at the beginning of winter and the holiday season. **Make sure you publicize your event on social media and encourage local press to promote and cover your event.** Each group should:

- Make and circulate a flyer that includes important information about your event such as time and place (see sample on page 9).
- Update your organizational and personal social media pages to promote the event.
- Submit a press release announcing your event to local media (see sample on page 13).
- Write and submit an article or letter-to-the-editor for your local newspaper drawing attention to your event and to the issue of homelessness (see sample on page 17).
- Invite local media to your event, if you feel comfortable doing so.

**Media coverage is a great tool to bring attention to governmental policies, or lack thereof, which can be a contributing factor to the homelessness in your area.** As governmental policies can also be part of the solution for homelessness, make sure to give credit where it is due.

Material on current policy issues is available at [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org) and [www.nhchc.org](http://www.nhchc.org).

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### ***Working with Us***

Please contact Megan Hustings [mhustings@nationalhomeless.org](mailto:mhustings@nationalhomeless.org) and/or Katherine Cavanaugh [kcavanaugh@hchmd.org](mailto:kcavanaugh@hchmd.org) with the following information:

- A description of your event
- The number of homeless people who have died in your community
- Photographs following the event

Additionally, please submit your event to our interactive map at:  
[www.nationalhomeless.org/about-us/projects/memorial-day/](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/about-us/projects/memorial-day/)

### ***For Additional Homeless Memorial Day Resources:***

Please visit <http://www.nhchc.org/resources/consumer/homeless-persons-memorialday/> to see resources and useful links for National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day.



## Sample Flyer



# Homeless Memorial Day

Thursday, December 18  
5:00 – 6:00 pm  
Dilworth Park, City Hall West  
Center City Philadelphia

As we approach the first official day of winter, hundreds of Philadelphians will gather to remember those homeless and formerly homeless Philadelphians who died in 2014 and to call for an end to homelessness. **Join us.**



Like Homeless Memorial Day on Facebook  
[facebook.com/HomelessMemorialPhilly](https://facebook.com/HomelessMemorialPhilly)  
Talk about us with: #HMDPhilly



Follow Us on Twitter: @HMDPhilly  
[twitter.com/HMDPhilly](https://twitter.com/HMDPhilly)  
Talk about us with: #HMDPhilly

For information, contact Will O'Brien, 215-232-7272 x 3047 or [WillOBrien@projecthome.org](mailto:WillOBrien@projecthome.org)

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Flyer courtesy of Project Home

## Sample Program

### The Longest Night of the Year

Welcome to the Annual Homeless Persons' Memorial Day Service in Central Florida.

This service commemorates the lives of the homeless members of our community who died. Participants will join community groups, service providers and individuals in cities across the United States who are holding their own services today.

This candlelight service is held on December 21st, the first day of winter and the longest night of the year. Our goal is to memorialize the lives of those who have died on our streets or in our shelters from conditions directly related to their homelessness. In many cases, this service will be the only commemoration of their lives.

In Seminole, Orange and Osceola Counties, 33 people lost their lives while homeless this year. Advocates, friends, community leaders and service providers hope to bring attention to the need for more resources to provide affordable housing, emergency shelter and medical care for our most vulnerable citizens.

Thank you for attending this service. For more information about how you can help end homelessness, contact

Homeless Services Network of  
Central Florida  
[www.hsncfl.org](http://www.hsncfl.org)  
(407) 893-0133

### Homeless Persons' Memorial Day

December 21<sup>st</sup> 9:00  
a.m.

*A ceremony to commemorate the  
lives of the homeless  
members of our community  
who died this past year*



Sponsored by

Hosted by  
First Presbyterian Church  
106 E. Church Street  
Orlando, FL 32801

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First Presbyterian Church

## MEMORIAL SERVICE

### Opening Prayer

Pastor Case Thorp  
First Presbyterian Church of Orlando

### Welcome

Cathy Jackson  
Homeless Services Network of Central Florida

### Proclamation from the City of Orlando

Alana Brenner  
City Clerk

### Eulogy

Robert Stuart  
Commissioner, City of Orlando

### Reading of the Names

Bakari Burns  
Chairman of the Board, Homeless Services  
Network

### Jackie Dowd Remembers George Crossley

### Co-workers Remember Steve "Rocky" Cook

### Musical Selection/ Poetry

### Closing Prayer (Candle Lighting) Pastor Case Thorp

## THOSE WE HONOR:

*Adrian Acevedo  
Connie Asbury  
Teri Lee Brookshire  
Albert Capps  
William Phillip Capps  
Brenda Davis  
David Dotterer  
Jonathon Wayne Duck  
James Evans  
James Fisher  
Arturo Miguel Garcia  
Timothy Giedlin  
Jay Girard  
David Glenn  
Lois Ann Gyermoti  
  
Keith Hess (known as Stacey)  
  
Heide Hewett  
  
David Hills*

*"J.R."  
Bernard King  
Daniel Martin Jacobs  
(known as Chief) Alan  
Martin  
Joe Mitchell  
Gerald Ramsey  
Susan Roa  
John Robicheaux  
Michael Self  
Phillip Tanner  
Jerry L. Thomas  
Sherry Tyner  
Bradley Watson  
John Handzlik  
(known as Mohawk)  
  
Wendell Wright  
  
Heather Young*

### Steve "Rocky" Cook George Crossley



HSN thanks the First Presbyterian Church of  
Orlando for hosting this memorial service.

## Sample News Release

### *Homeless Memorial Day Service – Tuesday, December 16, 2014*

Knoxville, TN – The open public is invited to gather in honor of those homeless and formerly homeless Knoxville's who have died in 2014. Knoxville's Homeless Person's Memorial Day, an annual event commemorated across the United States, will build on the theme of Remembrance, Hope, and Healing. It was officially recognized by a proclamation signed by now Governor Bill Haslam in 2009. This is Knoxville's 6<sup>th</sup> observance of the Homeless Memorial Day.

**WHO:** The Public is invited along with those people experiencing homelessness, advocates, shelters, faith-based organizations, healthcare providers, concerned citizens, city representatives, and local and state legislators.

**WHAT:** Homeless Memorial Day candlelight walk followed by a brief memorial service at St. John's Lutheran Church, in which the names of those who have died homeless will be read, followed by a tolling of the bell and the lighting of a candle for each person.

**WHERE:** The candlelight walk will begin at the Volunteer Ministry Center parking lot closest to Old Gray Cemetery at 511 N. Broadway.

**WHEN:** Tuesday, December 16, 6:00pm – 7:00pm

Studies across the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia have confirmed relationship between a lack of housing and increased mortality rates. This consistency has no borders. Homeless persons are 3-4 times more likely to die than the general population. On average, people with housing in the U.S. can expect to live to age 78. Our long term homeless neighbors can expect to live to about the age of 50. The Memorial Day focuses attention to collectively recommit efforts to prevent unnecessary deaths among our homeless neighbors.

As television, radio, and newspaper media are largely effective ways to address news to a community we are asking that you would be a part of advertising this event to our fellow Knoxville's. Thank you for all you do in our community, and if you can be a part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Knoxville Homeless Persons' Memorial Day please let us know.

**Submitted by:**  
Matt Tillery

## Sample State Proclamation



### PROCLAMATION

- WHEREAS,** THE WINTER POSES EXTREME HARDSHIP FOR UNSHELTERED AND INADEQUATELY HOUSED LOW-INCOME MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN IN DES MOINES; AND
- WHEREAS,** THE SPIRIT OF THE HOLIDAY SEASON OF GIVING PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AFFIRMATION AND RENEWAL REGARDING THE COMMITMENT TO END HOMELESSNESS; AND
- WHEREAS,** DECEMBER 21<sup>ST</sup> HAS BEEN DESIGNATED NATIONAL HOMELESS PERSONS' MEMORIAL DAY BY THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS AND THE NATIONAL HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS COUNCIL AND IS SO RECOGNIZED BY CITIES NATIONWIDE; AND
- WHEREAS,** JOPPA OUTREACH SERVES POLK COUNTY'S UNSHELTERED RESIDENTS LIVING IN TENTS, UNDER BRIDGES AND IN VEHICLES AND ORGANIZES THE IOWA HOMELESS MEMORIAL EACH YEAR TO HELP RAISE AWARENESS; AND
- WHEREAS,** IN THIS SEASON OF GENEROSITY AND SHARING, CITIZENS OF DES MOINES ARE ENCOURAGED TO COMMIT THEMSELVES TO PROMOTING COMPASSION AND CONCERN FOR ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE POOR AND HOMELESS; AND
- WHEREAS,** IN REMEMBERING THOSE WHO HAVE DIED ON THE STREETS, THE CAUSE OF ENDING HOMELESSNESS IS KEPT URGENT AS IS THE CITY'S COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT TO PREVENTING SUCH DEATHS IN THE FUTURE.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, T. M. FRANKLIN COWNIE, ON BEHALF OF THE CITY COUNCIL AND THE CITIZENS OF DES MOINES, DO HEREBY PROCLAIM SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2014, AS:

### NATIONAL HOMELESS PERSONS' MEMORIAL DAY

IN RECOGNITION OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE DIED HOMELESS IN AND AROUND DES MOINES, WE HEREBY ASK ALL CITIZENS TO TAKE A MOMENT OF SILENCE IN REMEMBRANCE AND ENCOURAGE OUR CITIZENS TO SUPPORT ALL LOCAL EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE HOMELESSNESS IN OUR COMMUNITY.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I HAVE HEREUNTO SET MY HAND AND CAUSED THE SEAL OF THE CITY OF DES MOINES, IOWA TO BE AFFIXED THIS EIGHTH DAY OF DECEMBER, TWO THOUSAND FOURTEEN.

**T. M. FRANKLIN COWNIE, MAYOR  
CITY OF DES MOINES**



## **Sample City/County Resolution**

### **The City of Greensboro Resolution**

Greensboro City Council Resolution Designating December 21<sup>st</sup> as National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day.

0318-14 RESOLUTION NAMING DECEMBER 21, 2014 NATIONAL HOMELESS PERSONS' MEMORIAL DAY

WHEREAS, December 21, 2014 marks the first day of winter and is the longest night of the year;

WHEREAS, the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Health Care for the Homeless Council have designated December 21, 2014 as National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day;

WHEREAS, in the season of generosity and sharing, citizens of Greensboro are encouraged to commit themselves to promoting compassion and concern for all, particularly during the winter months that pose extreme hardships for Greensboro citizens who are less fortunate and without homes;

WHEREAS, hunger and homelessness continue to be a serious challenge for many Greensboro citizens who have the right to adequate food, housing, clothing, safety and health care;

WHEREAS, homelessness raises one's risk of illness, injury and death;

WHEREAS, the Homeless Memorial Walk of Remembrance will take place in Greensboro on Wednesday, December 17, 2014 to honor those who have passed away in 2014 as a result of homelessness;

WHEREAS, by joining together and remembering our neighbors, we can honor their lives by working to provide solutions to end homelessness within the City.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF GREENSBORO:

That December 21, 2014 is hereby named National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day in Greensboro to remember those who have died homeless and to encourage citizens to come

together to celebrate their lives by working to resolve the factors that lead to homelessness within the City.

## **Sample Article**

### **Saying Good-Bye: A Story about Loss in a Shelter**

By: Barbara Anderson, director, Haven House Services, Jeffersonville, IN; NCH Board Member

Charles "Cash" Brown. Cash was the first person to ever die in the shelter. He had pancreatic cancer and said that the shelter was his home and it was his right to stay there. At first we including his daughter tried to hospitalize him, but he refused, adamantly. The staff and residents cared for him, as they would a family member, and he died 10 minutes before the ambulance arrived, that forced him to go to the hospital via a court order his daughter finally won. His daughter called us two months after his cremation and asked that his ashes be buried under the Japanese Elm in the front of the shelter. There are now six trees there. A plaque, donated by a local memorial company, bears their names. She said her father felt at home there for the first time in a long time and it meant something to him. He was an African American Vietnam Veteran, played in several bands, and retired from the Jefferson County Public School System as a maintenance man. They visit him and us, both she and her brother.

Jonelle Akers was our oldest in age, at 75, and our oldest in time at the shelter. She was a paranoid schizophrenic who I found sitting in the rain in 2006. We fought endlessly with the mental health system to get her placed but they said she was "lucid" and couldn't help her. She played the piano beautifully, cussed like a sailor, and looked over the children as if they were her own, while her own would not even claim her body. She too is under the tree.

Mike Kahafer was a Vietnam Veteran as well. He had constant pain and was a great guy, when he wasn't clouded over by the pain medication. His smile was the most infectious thing; you had to smile when he did smile on those rare occasions. His eyes were brilliantly blue, and he was a quiet man who really just wanted to get along. He died from heart failure after taking too much of his medication. He did not commit suicide, but was just trying to kill the pain.

Tommy Rawlings was an older man who drove his moped around town like a religion. He was struck by a car and died after 10 days. Tommy was a friendly, optimistic man. He didn't let anything stop him and just loved to ride his moped. There is a video about him on Facebook saying he didn't get hugs as a child, and until he became homeless he didn't feel loved. Once he entered homelessness he found an abundance of hugs. It was an odd statement because he felt more loved as a homeless man than a housed child.

"Cincinnati" John Anderson was an older man, a veteran, devoted to his deceased wife, Mary. They were nomadic in lifestyle and I really thought when Mary died two years ago that John would settle in and finally become housed because he had a substantial monthly income from

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veteran's and social security. He did not. His nickname came from the travels at the first of the month to Cincinnati to get his money. He would come back around the third week of the month dead broke and stay for two weeks. The cycle was repeated monthly for as long as I have known him and that was about 25 years. He had dancing blue eyes and loved to spin a story. He never lived without his drink and would not even ask to come to shelter because he knew he couldn't bring a drink. He would tease me and say, "Someday you are going to let it rip and we will party at the shelter all night long."

Jean Ruel died at 57. She worked for me as a VISTA volunteer for 3 years when we first started the shelter. Once her VISTA time was up she worked for us until she felt she couldn't work anymore. Her back and chronic pain was taking its toll on her body. That was 10 years ago, and since that time, a healthy robust woman became an emaciated shell of her former self. The pain medication she was taking became something she couldn't control. She eventually became homeless herself and entered our shelter for the fourth and final time, three months ago. She thrived. It was almost like having the old Jean back. Her humor was contagious, her daughter had come with her, and Jean was devoted to her, who is now a young adult. Jean got sick right after Christmas, so her name wasn't mentioned at the Memorial, but we lost her on Dec. 29, 2012. We would want her remembered.

"Old Nick" was an older gentleman who took care of the other street guys in Louisville. Being one of the oldest and longest to live on the streets, he knew them well and would mentor the guys. While he would look out for them, they would look out for him in return. When he died in his tent, it was after many had taken care of him. He had been called their "daddy".

It was a tough year. You fight many battles to serve folks but this one is one you don't win. When you bury someone in homelessness you find yourself feeling the loneliness as well. We don't believe anyone should die without someone knowing or caring, each of our folks received a celebration of life.