



## **Pray for the Dead and Fight like Hell for the Living: Honoring Homeless Person's Memorial Day - December 21<sup>st</sup>**

Recently, there has been greater attention to overt acts of violence perpetrated through mass shootings, police brutality, and growing incidents of homicide. We are shocked by these blatant acts of violence, yet there is another – more pervasive – form of violence in our communities: poverty. Unfortunately, we have become so accustomed to deep and desperate poverty; it no longer inspires the same distress as the discrete acts of violence that too often make the headlines. Of the 46 million people living in poverty in the U.S., too many suffer the ultimate consequences of our collective failure to acknowledge and address the brutal conditions of deprivation. Those who are so poor that they experience homelessness are three to four times more likely to die prematurely and have a life expectancy 30 years shorter than their housed counterparts.

On National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day (HPMD) – commemorated annually since 1990 on or about December 21, the first day of winter and longest night of the year – communities across the country come together to remember those who have died without stable housing, to reflect on the shocking inhumanity of homelessness, and to call for meaningful policy changes to ensure that no life is lived or lost in homelessness. Each HPMD event is unique to its community, but the commemorations often include reading of names, candles, prayers, personal remembrances, marches, and moments of silence.

Recently, the State of Hawaii and nine local jurisdictions declared a state of emergency around homelessness. These declarations provide us the opportunity to acknowledge that homelessness is a human-made disaster that has been at crisis levels for decades; and is one we have the tools to end if we can galvanize the political will needed for significant policy changes. Any solution to end homelessness must be grounded in greater access to affordable housing and supportive services to help individuals not only meet their basic needs, but thrive in their community.

Communities holding HPMD events should contact Katherine Cavanaugh, National Consumer Advocate, at [kcavanaugh@nhchc.org](mailto:kcavanaugh@nhchc.org) with information and photos about their event so the National HCH Council can better track events nationally. Our [HPMD tool kit](#) is available with resources to help communities plan events and better advocate for needed policy changes. Today, take pause with us to remember those who have lost their lives, and recommit ourselves to addressing the root causes of homelessness. Let us clearly state together that no person should die for lack of housing.

## Advocacy Recommendations for Homeless Person's Memorial Day 2015

While Homeless Persons' Memorial Day is a solemn occasion to remember those who have passed, we recommend that local groups conducting HPMD events use these opportunities to encourage changes in their community to prevent and end homelessness so that no others should die on the streets. Consider including in public statements some or all of the following policy priorities, or add others depending on local issues currently active:

1. Housing is a fundamental need, a basic human right, and protects people from illness, violence and death.
  - Local, state and federal governments should invest in affordable housing for all its residents, to include those at the lowest income levels.
  - Adequate supports to maintain housing (through a Housing First approach) should be available to those who need them in order to prevent homelessness.
2. State and local jurisdictions should declare formal States of Emergency to create additional resources for housing and services as well as more quickly facilitate zoning changes and other administrative actions needed to end homelessness.
3. Medical illnesses often go untreated for lack of accessible, affordable health care, and result in accelerated death rates and premature mortality for people without homes.
  - States that have not yet expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act must do so in order to facilitate the breadth of health care services for this population (who are often uninsured).
  - States and the federal governments should move toward single payer health care financing – expanded and improved Medicare for all – to eliminate remaining coverage gaps and financial barriers.
4. Alcohol-related illnesses and drug overdoses are among the leading causes of death for people experiencing homelessness.
  - States and local communities should ensure there is adequate capacity to provide substance abuse treatment for those who need it, to include intensive, residential programs
  - Harm reduction programs – including ready availability of naloxone, needle exchange, and safe injection sites – should be implemented.
5. People without homes are frequent victims of violence, which is sometimes fatal.
  - Jurisdictions should not pass laws that criminalize homelessness because arrests and displacement do nothing to solve the problem.
  - Law enforcement should focus on protecting vulnerable people, rather than on enforcing ordinances intended to limit their presence in public spaces.
6. Local jurisdictions should track, investigate and provide annual reports on all homeless deaths, and use the information to improve public policies and targeted interventions.
  - Death certificates should identify people who die while experiencing homelessness to provide better data on the extent of these tragedies.