

# San Francisco Homeless Death Review: Action and Reaction

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# Themes

- Support for HDR has been intermittent and influenced by political factors
- Alliance with community advocates has been essential for using HDR to reduce deaths
- Presenting data without an analysis of steps to reduce deaths can have negative results
- Without financial and institutional support to do this it may not be sustainable

# Introduction

- Review the long history of Homeless Death Review in San Francisco
- Why we do this – bear witness – reduce preventable deaths
- Successes – what worked and how to replicate
- Challenges – lessons learned

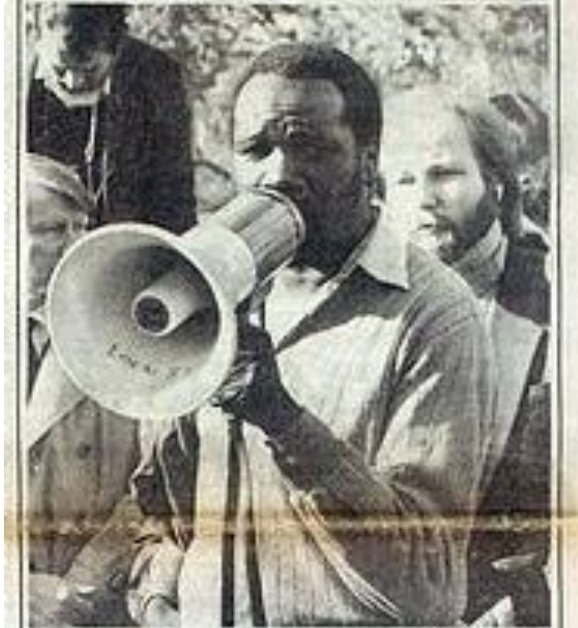
# A Brief History

- 1987 Tenderloin Times era: reporter starts homeless death count
- 1994 SFDPH era 1: public health epidemiology asked to take count over
- 2002 SFDPH stops Homeless Death Review
- 2015 SFDPH resumes Homeless Death Review
- 2024 ?



ral City since 1977 January, 1986

## Homeless Remembered



Street poet Ezekiel Ward spoke at a memorial service for the homeless last month, telling mourners, "Everyone should have food and shelter."

**st Evictions**  
**Vigil Mourns 16 Deaths on the Streets**  
 by Dennis Cookin and Rob Waters

## (SC) S.F. Homeless Deaths Top 100 Again, Study Finds

San Francisco Chronicle - The Voice of the West, 901 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94119 - MONDAY December 17, 1990  
**David Tuller, Chronicle Staff Writer**



# The street deaths of homeless people rose to 116...

**MMWR**<sup>TM</sup>*Weekly*

December 20, 1991 / 40(50);877-880

Persons using assistive technology might not be able to fully access information in this file. For assistance, please send e-mail to: [mmwrq@cdc.gov](mailto:mmwrq@cdc.gov). Type 508 A

## Deaths Among Homeless Persons -- San Francisco, 1985-1990

In San Francisco (1990 population: 723,959), an estimated 6000-18,000 persons are homeless. To characterize the causes of death among homeless persons in San Francisco, Health reviewed records of homeless decedents from the city medical examiner's (ME's) office. This report summarizes the results of that study.

# 1987 Tenderloin Times era: reporter starts homeless death count

- Why
  - Journalistic
  - Bear Witness
  - Used for advocacy by community advocates
- Successes
  - Published in small local weekly and picked up by mainstream press
  - Eventually collaboration with service providers and SFDPH
- Challenges
  - Media mostly accentuated negative
  - No clinical or social context
  - Small weekly newspaper lacked resources and eventually folded
- Lessons Learned
  - HDR was a needed activity
  - Use for HDR to guide policy requires analysis and intention
  - Clinical information is needed to
  - Objective information is subject to media needs and biases

**San Francisco Homeless Deaths  
Identified from Medical Examiner Records:  
December 1996 --- November 1997**

**Ricardo Bermúdez**<sup>1</sup>  
**Josh Brandon**<sup>1,2</sup>  
**Lynn von der Werth**<sup>2</sup>  
**Tomás Aragón**<sup>1</sup>


**Final Draft**

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**The New York Times**

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# *Homeless Deaths Are Rising in San Francisco*

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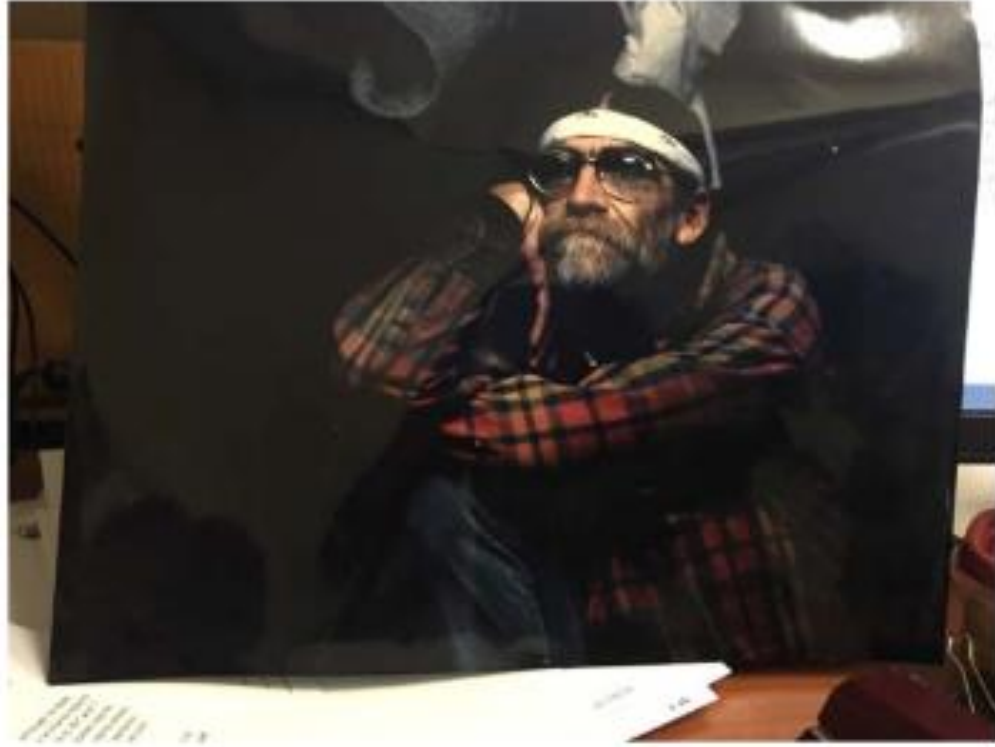


Dec. 21, 1998

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See the article in its original context from December 21, 1998, Section A, Page 18 | Buy Reprints





1994 SFDPH era 1: public health epidemiology division asked to take count over

- Why

- Report generates useful intervention for public health intervention
- Ability to incorporate clinical information from medical records
- Advocates believe this will make SFDPH more responsive to needs of PEH

- Successes

- Reports given to San Francisco Health Commission annually for about 5 years
- Written report produced for 3 years
- Homeless Death Prevention Work Group formed
  - Many community stakeholders and DPH staff participate
  - Recommendations for outreach team to be called Homeless Death Prevention Project (Later HOPE team) accepted and funded
- Support for overdose recognition and prevention efforts (community naloxone)

1994 SFDPH era 1: public health epidemiology division asked to take count over

- Challenges

- Expectations that HDPP would have immediate impact
- HDR and outreach team cut during budget shortfalls after 4 years
- Media coverage sensationalized numbers

- Lessons Learned

- Reports had great deal of epidemiological detail that media misinterpreted
  - Need to craft meaning and message that numbers alone do not
- Reports had limited information on next steps and successes of previous work done

# 2002 SFDPH stops Homeless Death Review

- Why
  - Elected officials ask “What good is it?”
  - Negative media coverage
  - Budget cuts
- Successes
  - Advocates and dedicated DPH staff remember usefulness of HDR
  - Names continue to be collected from community providers for yearly memorial and vigil
- Challenges
  - no opportunities to restart and expertise lost
- Lessons Learned
  - HDR is highly political in SF
  - Need to manage media but in some sense this will always be “bad news”

**Los Angeles Times**

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# Ensuring the Tenderloin's departed are not forgotten

Since founding San Francisco Network Ministries more than 40 years ago, the Rev. Glenda Hope has helped thousands of the city's most anonymous residents leave the world with grace.

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March 10, 2022

# Mortality Among People Experiencing Homelessness in San Francisco During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Caroline Cawley, MPH<sup>1,2</sup>; Hemal K. Kanzaria, MD, MSc<sup>1,2,3</sup>; Barry Zevin, MD<sup>4</sup>; [et al](#)

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*JAMA Netw Open.* 2022;5(3):e221870. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.1870

SAN FRANCISCO WHOLE PERSON CARE

## Homeless Mortality in San Francisco

Opportunities for Prevention

### NEWS

# Homeless Deaths in S.F. Are at Record High / Weather, drug abuse, shortage of rooms are possible factors

By Sabin Russell, Chronicle Staff Writer

Dec 16, 1998

Barry Zevin MD and Caroline Cawley MPH

Health Commission Feb 19 2019 – Background materials



# 2015 SFDPH resumes Homeless Death Review

- Why
  - New programs and funding focused on PEH
  - Need to guide prioritization on services and quality improvement of services
  - Existence of skilled evaluation team through medical waiver
  - Strong cooperation from Office of Chief Medical Examiner
- Successes
  - Weekly names from OCME allows real time interventions with survivors
  - Accurate counts done annually
  - Sophisticated analysis done
  - Work during COVID saved many lives
  - Focus on low barrier MAT programs to decrease overdose supported
  - Several peer reviewed papers published

# 2015 SFDPH resumes Homeless Death Review

- Challenges

- Currently operating as a “labor of love”
- Analysis deprioritized when funding ran out
- Political concerns continues to limit dissemination of results
- Service partners do not usually like to talk about deaths
- OCME overwhelmed by rising number of deaths and many competing demands
- Need for additional methodology beyond OCME

- Lessons learned

- HDR requires significant support to thrive



# 2024 The future of Homeless Death Review in San Francisco

- Why
  - Prevent preventable deaths, Remembrance, Quality Improvement
- Aspirations
  - Collaboration locally, statewide, and nationally will signal success
  - Sustainability beyond few champions
  - Homeless death review committees allowed by state
    - Operationalize in SF

# 2024 The future of Homeless Death Review in San Francisco

- Challenges

- Changing from “labor of love / keeping under the radar” to supported by systems
- Needs a place to live in the system

- Lessons Learned

- Keeping HDR going is hard work
- HDR can inform priorities and prevent deaths
- Local and national interest can sustain local interest