

Another tragic number from our streets

The number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County in 2015 is the highest it has been since we began counting.

According to the fifth annual Domicile Unknown report, co-authored by Street Roots, the Multnomah County Health Department and the Medical Examiner's Office, 88 people died while experiencing homelessness in 2015.

Twenty-one of them died from natural causes, 47 by accident (including overdose), five by suicide, five by homicide, and 10 individuals had unknown

causes of death, according to the medical examiner. The oldest person that died homeless in 2015 was 78 years old, the youngest was 17.

During the past five years, from 2011 to 2015, 279 individuals have passed away homeless on the streets of Multnomah County. That doesn't include those who were homeless but died in hospitals or under medical care.

That's 279 people. Dead. These are sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters.

"It's devastating. I don't even know where to start," said Mary, the sister of a man who passed away on the streets this past year. "We all tried so hard."

Mary's brother Christopher died a horrible death on April 19. Suffering from a perforated ulcer, Christopher spent two days in agony before passing away alone and isolated in a storage unit.

Christopher's story, like many others living with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder on the streets, is a story of both tragedy and the failure of our systems.

"The hardest thing is that we couldn't force him into treatment. He wouldn't go," said Mary. "We could have helped him, absolutely. I'm not holding anybody responsible, but as society we let him down. We did everything you could imagine and couldn't get any help. We tried so hard for years."

It's hard to describe what homelessness does to both the people experiencing it, their family, friends and the people on the front lines of poverty.

The trauma is overwhelming at times. Logical circumstances are rare. Reality is distorted and surreal. It's what we call on the streets a "fuck all!" Meaning, there's nothing even remotely rational about the circumstances we find

ourselves in. It's not a nice term. It isn't meant to be.

Krista, a mother who lost her son James in 2014 writes to me often. One of her latest communications was raw and honest. "Why wasn't I smart enough? Why wasn't I creative enough? Why wasn't I brave enough to ask for help or to ask the right questions? Why didn't I fight harder? Why didn't I pray more?"

"I am so tormented by my lack of actions and wonder why did my son have to die homeless and alone. I realize my son was an adult. I realize my son made his own choices. I realize my son knew the consequences, but as his mother I'm still tormented that I wasn't there to help save my baby."

It's something I hear over and over from the families of people who have passed away on the streets. Not only are people dealing with the trauma of losing a child, they are often times grieving alone.

The loss of a child or a death in the family is never easy. It can be even harder when the family member is homeless and committed suicide or died of a drug overdose. The feeling of judgment from peers and the stigmas attached to having a family member die on the streets can be isolating and torturous.

"There is nothing I can do now, Israel, but pray and ask God for forgiveness, guidance and peace," Krista went on to say. "I just wanted to enlighten you, encourage you and kick you in the ass."

Sadly, our collective asses are being kicked in every way in our city. The casualties are mounting and

there's no relief from the raging storm outside.

"We have to find a way to ensure that people experiencing mental health issues have access to help they need," said Mary, holding back tears. "I literally tried everything under the sun. We have so many people living on the streets who are simply sick. I wish I had some great words of wisdom, but I don't."

The sad reality is that beyond continuing to be strategic and working hard to invest in more affordable housing and mental health services — I don't have any words of wisdom either. People will continue to die on our streets by the dozens every year until our community changes course.

"Everyone's family has a story and this is part of our story," Mary told me.

"It's a devastating story, but it's our story."

Unfortunately, the 88 people experiencing homelessness that died in 2015 on our streets all have devastating stories. There's nothing I can say to sugar coat that reality. It's a tragic affair. It's a real fuck all.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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The feeling of judgment from peers and the stigmas attached to having a family member die on the streets can be isolating and torturous.

2015: 88 deaths

2014: 56 deaths

2013: 32 deaths

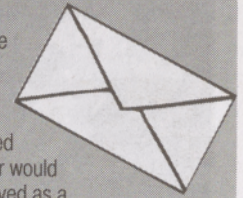
2012: 56 deaths

2011: 47 deaths

Source: Multnomah County Medical Examiner's office

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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