

WET BEDS

Housing bums could save money, human lives BY ALAN PITTMAN

W

ould Tom Egan be alive today if Eugene had “wet housing” for homeless people who continue to drink or use drugs?

Terry McDonald thinks so. “That would have been a perfect candidate for a wet bed,” said the St. Vincent de Paul director.

Egan, an alcoholic veteran, perished in the snow at 1st and Blair just before Christmas three years ago. With wet housing, “he probably wouldn’t have died,” McDonald said.

“Wet” beds are housing for chronically homeless people who continue to use alcohol or drugs. Over the past decade, hundreds of cities have successfully used such a “housing first” approach for the most troubled street people to save police, jail and hospital costs and save people. Portland has had wet beds for years. Corvallis opened up a dozen wet beds two months ago. But in Eugene, the Mission shelter won’t take people drinking and using drugs, and the city doesn’t have any wet beds.

“We all think that’s something that we would be interested in being able to provide,” Mayor Kitty Piercy said.

But getting the cost-efficient and humane housing innovation in Eugene has been slow. Twenty members of a “blue ribbon” city committee on the homeless recommended the approach three years ago. In January, McDonald pushed for funding as a member of the city Budget Committee, but with no progress.

“It’s a wonderful idea and something that is lacking,” said Paul Solomon, director of the Sponsors inmate rehabilitation program. But he said, “nothing has really gone anywhere.”

