Report Explores Deaths and Violence Against Homeless Persons In Santa Barbara County

A descriptive study of deaths and violence against homeless persons in the County will be presented to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, August 10, 2010. The report covers the period from January 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010. The full report will be available for viewing on the Public Health Department website at: www.sbcphd.org

The Board of Supervisors requested the study be undertaken by the Homeless Death Review Team which includes representatives from the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department, Department of Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Health Services, the Department of Social Services, the Santa Barbara Police Department, Casa Esperanza and Cottage Hospital. The effort was led by Dr. David Lennon, Medical Director of the County’s Healthcare for the Homeless Program. Together the team identified and studied the deaths of homeless persons in all areas of the County.

Forty-five (45) homeless persons were identified to have died during the 15-month study period. They can be described as follows:

- 87% male
- 82% Caucasian
- 22% of Hispanic ethnicity
- 53% were between the ages of 50 and 59 at the time of their death

The study highlights the complicated health and social service needs of people experiencing homelessness in Santa Barbara County. Some of the key findings are:

- Drug and alcohol abuse was most prevalent as either the primary cause or another significant condition contributing to the deaths.
- Many had mental health conditions identified in the medical records.
- A high percentage had other health conditions with an average of 8 conditions per patient in this study. Cardiovascular and musculoskeletal conditions were most prevalent.
- The lack of accurate and reliable data is a major hindrance in fully understanding and addressing the problem of violence and trauma against homeless persons in our community.

Dr. Lennon noted, “As with many studies, this one provides descriptive information and presents more questions than it proposes solutions. It’s a good beginning for Santa Barbara County to better understand the complicated health needs of homeless persons in our County.”

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