



MEDIA ADVISORY/REQUEST FOR COVERAGE

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**PITTSBURGH MERCY’S OPERATION SAFETY NET®
HOSTS CANDLELIGHT MEMORIAL SERVICE
TO REMEMBER PERSONS WHO DIED
WHILE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN 2019**

Annual public vigil set for December 21, winter solstice & longest night of the year

WHAT: [Pittsburgh Mercy’s Operation Safety Net®](#), an innovative, award-winning medical and social service outreach program for persons experiencing homelessness, invites the public to attend its annual candlelight memorial service to remember the 12* individuals who are known to have died on the street while experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County in 2019, along with another 35* deceased individuals who were recently housed or in shelter at the time of their death. The free event will include a welcome by Ben Talik, Operation Safety Net outreach case manager; a prayer by Pittsburgh Mercy’s Janice Kochik, a nurse practitioner with Operation Safety Net, and Bill Connolly, mission director; songs performed by Smokestack Lightning and Rising Voices Youth Choir; and remembrances by Eric Baumgartner, whose friend is among the deceased, and Jay Poliziani, director of Northside Common Ministries. Dr. Jack Todd Wahrenberger, chief medical officer for Pittsburgh Mercy and medical director of Pittsburgh Mercy Family Health Center, is the keynote speaker.

WHO: The public is invited to join [Pittsburgh Mercy](#) and [Bethlehem Haven](#) leadership, physicians, nurses, care managers, social workers, volunteers, community partners, and others who are concerned about social justice for persons experiencing homelessness.

Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net hosts candlelight memorial service to remember persons who died while experiencing homelessness in 2019

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WHEN: Saturday, December 21, 2019, at 7 p.m.

WHERE: Fort Pitt Boulevard at Grant Street, Downtown Pittsburgh

There, beneath a busy highway overpass, a memorial wall of bronze plaques commemorates the 177* individuals who are known to have died while homeless in Allegheny County since 1989.

WHY: Each year on December 21 – the first day of winter, the winter solstice, and the longest night of the year – the [National Coalition for the Homeless](#) and homeless service providers throughout the United States host public events to call attention to the plight of people who have died while experiencing homelessness. Pittsburgh is among more than 150 U.S. cities to take part in National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day observances.

According to the National Healthcare for the Homeless Council, the average age of death for a person experiencing homelessness is 50 years, compared to 78 years for a person who is not homeless. Talik said one-third of the early deaths are attributed to drug and alcohol abuse. Suicide rates are nine times more likely while homeless and traffic accidents are high on the list. He said 20 of the deaths this year in Allegheny County were people under age 40; eight were younger than 30; and the youngest was only 20 years old.

[Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net](#)[®], a member of [Trinity Health](#), serving in the tradition of the [Sisters of Mercy](#), has organized a public vigil in Pittsburgh every year since 1998.

Donations of new men's and women's hats, gloves, boots, and thermal underwear will be collected for distribution to individuals at the [Winter Shelter](#). Monetary donations in support of the shelter and Operation Safety Net's important work in the community are welcome at www.pittsburghmercy.org. When making a donation online, please designate the gift for Operation Safety Net. For more information about giving opportunities, please visit www.pittsburghmercy.org, or contact Pittsburgh Mercy Development at Development@pittsburghmercy.org or 724-934-3537.

**These numbers are subject to change between now and the end of the year.*

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About Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net®

[Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net®](#) is an award-winning, innovative medical and social service outreach program for the unsheltered homeless population in Allegheny County. It strives to address the circumstances which undermine the behavioral and physical health of persons served by creating avenues for people who are homeless to access the medical and social services that are necessary for them to improve their quality of life. Since its founding in 1992, Operation Safety Net has reached thousands of individuals where they live – in camps along riverbanks, in alleyways, or beneath bridges and highway overpasses. In 2018, we served more than 2,541 persons experiencing or at risk of homelessness. We helped 588 of them to obtain safe housing. In doing so, Operation Safety Net not only assists with providing health care and affordable housing, but also offers this vulnerable population hope, dignity, and a sense of community. Operation Safety Net is part of [Pittsburgh Mercy](#) and [Trinity Health](#), serving in the tradition of the [Sisters of Mercy](#). To learn more, or to make a donation in support of our important work in the community, visit www.pittsburghmercy.org.

About Pittsburgh Mercy

[Pittsburgh Mercy](#), a member of [Trinity Health](#), serving in the tradition of the [Sisters of Mercy](#), is a person-centered, population-based, trauma-informed community health and wellness provider. Pittsburgh Mercy, home to the region's only Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic, is also one of the largest nonprofit organizations and employers in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh Mercy includes Bethlehem Haven, McAuley Ministries, Pittsburgh Mercy Behavioral Health, Pittsburgh Mercy Community Health, Pittsburgh Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services, the Pittsburgh Mercy Parish Nurse & Health Ministry Program, Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net®, and Pittsburgh Mercy Family Health Center. Together, these Pittsburgh Mercy programs and their 1,500 employees serve more than 33,000 individuals annually at 70+ locations in Southwestern Pennsylvania. To learn more about [Pittsburgh Mercy](#), or to make a donation in support of its important work in the community, visit www.pittsburghmercy.org.

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