

Rachael Gangelhoff

From: Lynelle Wilcox <lynellx@comcast.net>
Sent: Monday, December 8, 2025 4:27 PM
To: CityRecorder
Cc: Julie Hoy; Vanessa Nordyke; Paul Tigan; Mai Vang; Micki Varney; Shane Matthews; Linda Nishioka; Deanna Gwyn; Dr. Irvin M Brown
Subject: [EXTERNAL]Public Comment 12082025 agenda item 1.3.a

Mayor and City Council,

I live in Ward 1, and I am writing this 2nd public comment regarding today's proclamation that declares December 21, 2025, as Homeless Persons' **Memorial Day**.

In January 2023, Melisa Blake received high quality care at Salem Hospital, and then was released from the hospital to ARCHES' parking lot where she was dying on cold asphalt in the freezing air. A warming center was open a mile away. ARCHES opening staff found Melisa and called 911 and stayed with her as she died - offering humanity that life and the world denied her. Melisa was only 34 years old.

I knew Melisa. A week before Melisa died, a dear friend of mine had died in the comfort of his home. He'd become suddenly and unexpectedly sick, and declined quickly. He lives in Nevada, and his girlfriend created a Facebook group for sharing news, resources, support, and friendship across time and miles. We each prayed for a miracle, as the miracle failed to come, as we grew to know slices of each other.

I had not met his girlfriend, yet in the online conversations she shared their hopes, dreams, and plans and she shared their hopes, dreams, and plans lost. She shared about their love, and she shared stories of his last weeks and hours and moments. It's not fair and he was too young, and they had just found love this year, and we all expected to be able to hang out with him again sometime.

Instead, he died with care and comforts, warm and safe in her lovely home, in a hospital bed to make him comfortable, with his loved ones wrapping him in love, across time and miles.

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The very next week, Melisa died. I knew Melisa from working at warming shelters and from sometimes cooking and serving dinners at ARCHES, from Salem's annual discrimination survey, from volunteering at some homeless events, and from having many reasons to visit Arches often.

When I first met her, she was struggling with addiction. Over time, she shared proudly that she was clean. I have only a sliver of understanding how very hard it might be to be clean when there is so much to try to escape from, as you are living on the streets and camps, with so much weather, pain, risk, harm, and trauma as you navigate each day in survival mode, as people often treat you as if you are invisible or vermin. Not seeing that you are really a warrior who is still standing, against all odds.

Melisa's a petite wisp of a girl whose life paths have not been easy. She's one of the people who sometimes slept under downtown awnings, because there was nowhere for her to be, and as human beings, we all need some shelter from the elements. She's someone who would smile as she said hello, even though her life was not giving her much to smile about.

On January 21st, she died in ARCHES' parking lot on cold asphalt in the freezing air. The life and death disparity hurt. The life and death disparities still hurt.

I keep having to look for new stars in the night sky, as a way to think about and honor each person's heart, soul, and life. Their lives and deaths matter every single day. I suppose December 21st will be a day that we might all honor their lives, and hopefully commit to doing better. We each have a role in that, and you each have positions where you can make things better or worse for fellow human beings. Safety and livability for all.

Respectfully,  
Lynelle Wilcox

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## Rachael Gangelhoff

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**From:** Lynelle Wilcox <lynellx@comcast.net>  
**Sent:** Monday, December 8, 2025 4:04 PM  
**To:** CityRecorder  
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**Subject:** [EXTERNAL]Public Comment 12082025 agenda item 1.3.a

Mayor and City Council,

I live in Ward 1, and I am writing in regard to today's proclamation that declares December 21, 2025, as Homeless Persons' Memorial Day.

I'm grateful that we are declaring a day to honor the hearts, souls, and lives of people who have died in shelters or on the streets, with nowhere to live. I've served people experiencing homelessness since 2018 - initially as a warming center volunteer, at many events, in Salem's annual discrimination survey, and now also in my job at SafeSleep United - United Way's overnight, low barrier, women's shelter.

In my volunteer and work experiences, we've seen people experiencing homelessness discharged from hospitals to street corners and parking lots in the dead of winter, wearing just paper clothing. Some people are released to the streets after surgeries or amputations with wound care needs that are not possible to do in an unsheltered environment. One man was released in his wheelchair at midnight, still so sick that he could not wheel himself anywhere, and he was not strong enough and mobile enough to use a toilet. At a warming center, we gave him a private corner, toilet paper, and a bucket - a shred of dignity that every person deserves - sheltered or not.

In this work, some people struggle to "move forward". I used to think why don't they just get a job? Why don't they just go to detox and rehab if they struggle with addiction? Why don't they see a psychiatrist and get medication if they are struggling with mental illness? Along the way of doing this work, I've learned how none of those are as simple or as easy as I used to think they are. If I were to write a book, it would be "Why Don't They Just...?"

Besides the trauma and survival mode of existing with nowhere to live, individuals experiencing homelessness are regularly treated as if they are vermin or invisible. They

experience ongoing discrimination and are often targeted for violence. One man was beaten to death by a teenager a year or so ago. Many individuals share that they sometimes sleep on sidewalks, in plain view, so they have the (illusion?) of more safety by sleeping in public space. Some men have shared that they have woken up as other men are peeing on them - when the bars close, this is the idea of fun for some twisted individuals. People experiencing homelessness have been attacked, raped, robbed, sex trafficked, had people shoot at them, throw firecrackers at them, narrate their actions via a bullhorn, scream insults at them, do loud wheelies in parks where people camp, and so many other flavors of physical and/or verbal harm. The risks, trauma, and violence are real and all too common.

The ongoing trauma, discrimination, outright violence, and barriers for moving forward often have people feeling no hope. Without hope, there is little energy to go through the motions to try to move forward. It's sadly common that people have shared that they know they will die on the streets - it's not a question of "if"; it's just a matter of "when". One woman said those very words to me when I had to tell her that we didn't have open shelter beds at the time. She died the next week, alone on the streets.

These situations are not compassionate or humane and they are far too common. Most people experiencing homelessness are still getting up each day and trying again - warriors walk, sleep, and live among us, against all odds. Any of us could become homeless if a life emergency costs more than our resources or circle of people can cover. Each person is someone's someone. Each person deserves dignity in life, and in death.

Some individuals have died after they were housed. One woman was housed only two days before she died. Her wish was not to die in a shelter or on the streets. She had her wish, and yet it's so bittersweet, with little solace in that.

These deaths are heartbreaking, yet at least some people finally had a place where they could sleep, eat, use the restroom, be. Everyone deserves that. It is humbling to honor their lives and to honor their deaths, as we work to do better.

I'm glad that Salem is working to improve safety and livability for ALL. I hope we really mean ALL.

Thank you for this proclamation to recognize, honor, and grieve their lives.

Lynelle Wilcox

Thank you for your time,

Kendra Taylor, CSWA

Executive Director of Kindness Closet of Salem

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