EAU CLAIRE — Members of the community will come together this Monday to remember the unhoused who have lost their lives in the past year.

The event, the Homeless Memorial Vigil, will be organized by religious leaders from JONAH (Joining Our Neighbors Advancing Hope) in Wilson Park on Dec. 22 at 5 p.m., no matter what the weather.

The vigil coincides with National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, which in turn coincides with one of the days of the year with the least amount of sunlight. At the vigil, each homeless individual who has died in the past year will have their names read, followed by a bell rung after each name.

Julian Emerson, former Leader-Telegram reporter, was asked by organizers to take part in the vigil. Emerson was the author of a series in 2014 that examined the issue of homelessness in the Chippewa Valley. He went as far as to live on the streets himself in order to give perspective on how the unhoused lived from day to day.

"I'm one of a group of eight or nine people who have been involved with planning this event and to [consider] what our agenda is going to be, how we make this happen — the nuts and bots of it," said Emerson. "How do we remember and honor the unhoused people who have died here?"

"It's also meant in a bigger way to recognize the fact that people who are unhoused die for a variety of reasons, oftentimes related to long-term exposure to the weather, concurrent health problems, and oftentimes [their deaths are] not recognized. Their deaths don't get an obituary, necessarily, or a notice or a claim that a lot of other folks who die get."

He reflected on his time working for the newspaper and how at that time — much like now — society in general had a habit of dehumanizing those who found themselves living on the streets.

"I go back to that winter I spent on the streets years ago to write that first series, and the first folks I got to know pretty well who were homeless," Emerson said. "It's easy to forget that sometimes, because of the challenges they face, or the difficult situations they deal with — especially the long-term mental health issues, substance abuse issues or other things they have going on. I think sometimes that we forget that in the end they're people too. And so, for me, it's about recognizing the humanity; that these are people as well; that they deserve some kind of dignity in whatever way we can give that to them."

Patrick Patterson, the lead pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church of Eau Claire and also one of the event's organizers, mentioned that when he lived in Minnesota he would take part in "holding space" during a holiday parade for those who had died. Upon moving to Eau Claire, he held a vigil in 2021 after a homeless woman died in downtown Eau Claire.

"That was the year we decided we should do it for her, and for all of the other folks who died that year," Patterson said. "It chokes me up a little bit to think of the humanity — this person who lived a life and was not going to be remembered at all, or that people wouldn't even

know [that person] was gone because no one stopped to take time to recognize them and honor their life."

He recalled that first vigil being extremely cold.

"And that's the point of it, right? To think about how, on the longest night and having that temperature to deal with, what it might be like. We're only talking [being out] for 20 or 30 minutes, but just think if you spent the whole night on the street in weather like that," he said.

Patterson said that momentum had been building up for the vigil as individuals and organizations in the area have strived for services to aid the homeless, citing the upcoming Better Way providing a center for those unhoused to stay warm during the day, as well as to provide other services such as a space for laundry.

Emerson noted that, while he commends efforts to both address homelessness and its causes such as high housing costs, that there is still so much more to do as the number of unhoused people in the area increases.

"The numbers of people struggling to maintain their current housing and the number of people who are becoming homeless continue to grow. It's a very, very difficult issue to address, and we need to continue to partner as much as we can and continue to do better for this population," he said, "And when we do that, our whole community is better. It's better for our downtown business owners, and it's better for the service providers. It's better for all of us as a city if we have more people getting out of this hardship and getting into better places in their lives."

As the struggle against homelessness continues, there are those that are organizing the vigil who know the value of giving even those who lost their lives in terrible circumstances the dignity of being remembered and mourned.

"This should be done every year — and as long as I am around, it will," said Patterson.