

Helping the sick and homeless

Program helps seriously ill homeless people by paying for recovery time after a hospital visit.

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Photo: Deborah Cannon/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

After being hit by a car in 2008, Verta Freison received help from the Recuperative Care Program. Freison, who was then homeless, lives in transitional housing and is studying for her GED.

Verta Freison spent years drinking and taking drugs. She went to prison, lost her family, slept in homeless camps and struggled with heart, kidney and blood-pressure problems.

Then the 61-year-old Austin woman was hit by a car. She was sent to the Recuperative Care Program, which provides medical care to seriously ill homeless people. And that, Freison said, is what saved her life.

"I surely would have died," she said. "I had no one to take care of me and I couldn't take care of myself."

The Recuperative Care Program was created in April 2008 by the Integrated Care Collaboration, an organization that works to improve access to health care for low-income people, and Front Steps, an Austin nonprofit that provides services for homeless people. The effort — which has been funded by donors, including Beth and David Swalm and St. David's Foundation — takes seriously ill homeless people off the streets and admits them to a South Austin nursing home.

Last year, homeless Austin celebrity Leslie Cochran made headlines when he was found with a serious head injury, then hospitalized before being transferred to a rehabilitation program. But that's not the case for most homeless people, said Front Steps Executive Director Helen Varty.

Generally, because they don't have insurance, homeless people are released from hospitals before they are completely healed, she said. They're not sick enough for hospice, but many of them have alcohol or drug problems, which exacerbate their health problems, she said.

Consequently, many of these people make routine visits to local emergency rooms. Meanwhile, homeless shelters are ill-equipped to handle sick people.

"It was frightening the clients and (shelter) staff because we didn't know how to handle someone so sick," Varty said.

Front Steps developed the recuperative care program not only to care for the sick, but to connect them with sobriety programs, housing, medical insurance, education and other services. Since its inception, the program — which can help four to seven people at any given time — has served 48 people.

Freison was one of them. She says she was trapped in addiction for years. She had been married twice, lost touch with her children and served time in prison for drug possession, she said. Eventually, she was living on the streets, in hotels and in homeless camps. Her health deteriorated. She had thyroid cancer, but no money for proper treatment.

Then in 2008, Freison was hit by a car while standing at a bus stop. After she was released from the hospital, she went to recuperative care, where she received medical treatment for her ailments, including the cancer. She is now sober and lives in transitional housing provided by Front Steps. She is studying for her GED, volunteers with a prison ministry and wants to become a licensed chemical dependency counselor.

The first full year of the Recuperative Care Program cost \$394,700 and served about 30 people. Of those people who used the program in the first year:

- All 30 were signed up for financial benefits such as food stamps, transportation assistance or Veterans Affairs benefits.
- Eighteen applied for and received Medicaid, which funded \$81,000 in reimbursements to the hospitals that treated them. Eighteen applied for and received Supplemental Security Income or Supplemental Security Disability Insurance.
- Twenty-two left the nursing home fully recuperated; 17 went on to stable housing.
- Many of the clients went to the emergency room less often. One patient who used to visit the hospital 15 times a year has only been to the ER twice in the year since his release, Fowler said.

"Being sick opens people up to the possibility of change," said Kameron Fowler, the program manager. "They accept support."

Freison gives the recuperative care program the credit for her recovery.

"It was a blessing," she said. "I feel like God opened the door to me at the right time."

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