

Center offers help in healing

Homeless now have access to recovery care

by **Brittany Smith** - Nov. 23, 2012
The Republic | azcentral.com

When Kevin Martin checked into St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center for pneumonia in September, he was 40 pounds underweight, couldn't get around without a walker and had trouble lifting his right arm.

Martin, 49, was homeless and addicted to methamphetamine. He said his life had spun out of control.

He spent more than three weeks recovering in the hospital. Then, Dr. Adele O'Sullivan and a nurse approached him.

O'Sullivan asked him if he'd like to be the first patient admitted to Circle the City Medical Respite Center, Arizona's first facility to provide free recovery care for homeless adults.

Martin transferred to the respite center on Oct. 23. Since then, he has gained 15 pounds, recovered his ability to walk on his own and remained sober.

The respite center, near Third Avenue and Indian School Road, can treat up to 50 patients at a time. Circle the City, a non-profit organization founded in 2008 to provide medical and social services to the Valley's homeless, operates the center.

The center's leaders hope it will prevent homeless people from returning to the hospital for expensive emergency care. The project has been in the making in Arizona for more than a decade.

It is not a walk-up service. Patients are admitted only upon hospital referral.

The center is partially funded through payments from referring hospitals, which have charity-care funds built into their budgets. Donations from the public and grants from foundations and corporations provide additional funding.

The experience

The center was a stark contrast to how Martin had been living: He had clean sheets on his own bed, three meals a day and access to medicine.

The facility is welcoming, too. Pastel colors and artwork cover the walls, and nurses greet patients by name when they pass them in the halls.

Source: http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2012/11/23/20121123center-offers-help-healing.html?nclick_check=1

Staffers also helped Martin find substance-abuse meetings and offered physical-therapy classes.

"I woke up, and it just felt like I was home," Martin said. "I've been spoiled."

Martin left the center on Nov. 16.

"The biggest change is the way I see myself," Martin said. "This place has given me hope, and when I look in the mirror, I feel comfortable in my skin. I'm liking who Kevin is now."

Another patient at the center, Steven Beeman, lost his home in February after he was laid off. He checked himself in to St. Joseph's for cellulitis, an inflammation of the tissue in his legs. His legs and feet swelled and kept him from walking.

Being sick while homeless leads to a perpetual cycle, Beeman said. He has been to the hospital three times in the last year.

"You don't have the food or the resources to keep you healthy, so your health declines," he said. "So you go to the hospital. But then you're discharged back into the homelessness that made you sick."

Beeman checked in to the respite center at the beginning of November and said he already feels better.

Community responds

O'Sullivan, a nun with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, founded Circle the City and its respite center. Watching her project become a reality has been "like walking in a dream," she said.

According to O'Sullivan, the program depends on the goodness of the community, and the community has been very generous. Doctors have agreed to perform eye surgeries on two patients, and a therapist is providing speech therapy for another patient. A group of quilters from Resurrection Lutheran Church visited the center on Nov. 15 to donate 30 twin-size quilts to the center.

"What we've seen is the progression of light going on in the community that we exist," O'Sullivan said. "The message is growing."

The respite center offers a holistic type of medical recovery. Staffers set up patients with a case manager, who tries to find them work and permanent housing when they leave. Depending on their needs, they also can connect patients with substance-abuse and mental-health counseling.

Jerry Anderson, who suffered a broken neck and partial leg paralysis after a truck hit him in 2003, said before seeking treatment for his injuries, being homeless and sick made him feel like a dried-up weed on the side of the street. Passers-by would kick, spit and laugh at him, he said.

Comfort, he said, is what makes a person heal the most.

"Holding a person's hand and telling them that you appreciate them, that's what makes the swelling go down," Anderson said.

Anderson, who is 53 and has been homeless since he was 16, said he believes the respite center is giving him a second chance at a normal life.

"I don't know why I was picked to come here, but all of us here, we're all rescued," he said.

About 1,700 homeless people were counted in the metro area in 2011, the vast majority in Phoenix.