

For the injured homeless, there's no place to heal

The financially vulnerable are too sick for the streets, have few options for recovery

Jul 31, 2012

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Roger Sellman's fiancée, Brandy Hendrickson, has been helping care for him after his July 20 accident. She called a long list of organizations to seek help. / Nathan Papes/News-Leader

When Mercy Hospital released Roger Sellman on July 23, surgeons had replaced part of his skull with a titanium plate. A highway guardrail had punctured his brain following a fall from a moped three days earlier.

Sellman had no home, no insurance and no money, so the hospital offered him two nights in a men's mission. Sellman declined. He said he needed his fiancée, Brandy Hendrickson, with him to care for him.

Source: <http://www.news-leader.com/article/20120731/NEWS01/307310030/>

The hospital had no other options, and neither did the social service organizations Hendrickson contacted. Some had funds, but only for disaster victims. Others had space, but not for unmarried couples. Still more had assistance strictly earmarked for women with children.

So where do homeless people like Sellman turn after a hospital says it has fulfilled its responsibility? When nonprofit organizations can't help?

Sellman's predicament offers a glimpse into the health care access vortex some people call "medical respite care" — a kind of health care desert where the financially vulnerable find themselves too sick or weak to recover on the streets or in a homeless facility, but not sick or injured enough to remain hospitalized.

"This isn't just our story," said Hendrickson, who spent those three days in the hospital at Sellman's side calling dozens of agencies searching for a safe, clean place where he could recover. "This happens to a lot of people."

Michelle McCoy, director of OneDoor, stands at the confluence of this issue. Hospitals and homeless people themselves call OneDoor hoping the 3-year-old nonprofit can find a place where the sick or injured can recuperate.

McCoy has advocated for more motel vouchers to place the needy in safe, clean surroundings where they can heal. Her recent bout with pneumonia, which left her on a two-week home bed rest, helped put this problem in perspective.

"Knowing what it was like to be sick and how horrible that experience was and I wasn't even hospitalized," McCoy said. "Then, to think about what that would be like if you bumped it up a notch and you didn't have a home? I just can't imagine how terrible it would be not to have a home to go to and get well."

Michelle Garand, director of the housing office at the Community Partnership of the Ozarks, called medical respite care a huge issue and a huge need.

"Hospitals do all they can, but they aren't a housing program either," Garand said.

Mercy Hospital spokeswoman Sonya Kullmann said it wasn't uncommon for the hospital to release patients who have nowhere to go, but they try to bridge the gap.

They contact McCoy's organization and others. They offer taxi and bus vouchers. They will pay for a stint in a shelter, an option they offered Sellman.

"When we discharge anyone, part of the process is finding out whether they have an appropriate place to go," Kullmann said. "We do this for everyone."

Mercy Springfield Communities gave about \$81 million in uncompensated care, charity care and community benefit last year. At some point, an organization has done all it could do, she said.

“The bottom line is that Mercy can’t do it all,” she said. “We would love to do it all, but we can’t. We give the care that we can give.”

Sellman needed every bit of the care Mercy gave.

The bulging sutures and staples atop his shaved head resemble the curved laces on a baseball. He said he doesn’t remember falling asleep on his moped or flying headfirst into a guardrail on U.S. 65 on July 20.

That was a Friday evening. By Monday, doctors told him he was well enough to discharge.

“It’s nobody’s fault,” Sellman said of his predicament.

He said the hospital follows its rules and he’s followed his own troubled path, which included prison time for multiple stealing and burglary charges. He has a relative in town but isn’t welcome there. He had been working but was laid off. In fact, he said he was returning from a trip to Branson to find work when he crashed.

“I can’t even be mad at them,” Sellman said of the doctors who discharged him. “They don’t have to care. It’s not their problem. It’s not their business.”

So under some deadline pressure, Hendrickson tore through a stapled stack of 15 sheets of paper listing charitable organizations and called them. A hospital social worker gave her the papers, some of which were copied from the News-Leader.

Sellman said he couldn’t make the calls. He said his brain and left eye felt as though they were on fire.

“If he was here alone and I wasn’t here to do this for him,” said Hendrickson, flipping through the pages between calls, “who would be doing this for him?”

The Rev. James Harriger, executive director of the Springfield Victory Mission, said the Victory Mission is often asked to take in the sick and injured homeless and it does so in silent protest.

The legal liabilities for someone faltering or dying while there stagger the imagination, he said. Still, the mission takes them anyway.

“They don’t have anyplace else to go,” Harriger said. “But we don’t have the trained personnel to take care of people. ... I have a volunteer doctor who’s here eight hours a week, but he’s not there to take care of people coming from hospitals.”

From the hospital room, Hendrickson eventually connected with Crosslines of Springfield, a nonprofit that paid for two nights at the Budget Inn on North Glenstone Avenue. Other donations — meal vouchers, money for detergent and deodorant — followed.

Second Baptist Church paid for two more days in the inn. Hope Church paid for an additional week.

Ziggie's restaurant nearby gave Hendrickson food and a little money when she entered looking for a waitress job. Domino's Pizza gave them a large pizza. Steak-Out brought food. Culver's offered them dinner. The Budget Inn manager gave them a little cash and moved a small refrigerator and microwave into their room.

At Mercy, one nurse brought Hendrickson clothes from her own closet so she could shower and change.

OneDoor gave the couple a seven-day bus pass, some food vouchers and more clothes.

"We just needed a little help, and people have been so great," Hendrickson said. "They've been so willing to help. It's been amazing."

Sellman's immediate future, however, isn't so great, she said flatly.

The room, full with strangers' generosity, is actually quite small. Friday, they ran out of the donated meal certificates, which they'd attempted to stretch into two or three meals.

Sellman said the hospital discharged him before reining in his pain so he's in nearly constant pain that worsens at night. Every noise, he said, is amplified by a factor of 10.

"My brain is killing me," he said.

He cries from the pain, and that makes Hendrickson cry.

"Everyone is scrambling to do the right thing," Sellman said. "The hospital, I call it St. John's, has rules and regulations that they can't bend. I get that. It's not a matter of me being intentionally treated unfairly. And I'm the one sitting here with half my brain bashed in.

"But somebody's got to do something."