

Homeless Patient Program Expands

Successful in Orange County, it Moves Northward

Building on considerable success in securing recuperative care and housing for homeless patients after they're discharged from Orange County's hospitals, two Southern California foundations will replicate the program in Los Angeles County starting next month.

The Los Angeles-based National Health Foundation and Irvine-based Illumination Foundation will start small: homeless patients will receive recuperative care at a yet-to-be named motel in the Mid-City area of Los Angeles while social workers help them find transitional or permanent housing. The staff will be a mixture of paid professionals and graduate students from the University of Southern California and Alliant University.

Officials say the 20-bed site will be one of at least four countywide to assist with homeless patients. Other recuperative care "pods" are expected to open in Long Beach, the South Bay and the San Fernando Valley. Each will have a nurse and case manager onsite.

The program not only helps the homeless, but addresses what has been a public relations problem for Southern California hospitals, which discharge about 6,000 homeless inpatients a year. Following media scrutiny about the "dumping" of homeless patients, the City of Los Angeles made it a misdemeanor in 2008 to discharge a homeless patient onto the street.

In January, NHF and Illumination launched a similar program in Orange County. Discharged homeless patients stay in a Costa Mesa motel under the supervision of a nurse while social workers find them appropriate benefits and housing. The costs of \$200 per patient per day are borne by the hospitals.

Of the 105 patients that have been referred for recuperative care, more than 60% have been placed in housing, according to Illumination Foundation Executive Director Paul Leon. Leon noted that many of the Orange County patients had chronic conditions that entitled them to state disability payments of \$800 to \$1,400 a month – enough to secure housing in a board and care or a sober living facility. Getting them qualified for such programs was virtually impossible prior to the recuperative care program. "It's far easier to get them stable funding because they're at one place for a period of time," Leon said. "Before, they were just moving all around, oftentimes right back to the hospital because they never had a chance to recuperate."

Patients stay an average of just under 10 days before they're placed elsewhere. That is far better than the 30-day average stay that occurred when the NHF conducted a two

year pilot program with the Los Angeles based JWCH Institute in conjunction with a homeless shelter in Bell. That program ended last March.

Leon credits the shorter length of stay to close coordination between the recuperative caregivers, hospitals and social workers. It also makes the costs far more palatable to hospitals, according to Kelly Bruno, NHF's vice president of programs. "We've already been approached by 10 hospitals in the last couple of days," said Bruno, who added that most facilities in the county have yet to be formally notified of the program.

Along with NHF funding, Kaiser Permanente's Southern California division is providing the L.A. County program with a \$50,000 grant. The California Endowment is likely to grant another \$100,000, according to Leon.