

Medical respite center planned for homeless

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Sister Adele O'Sullivan is bringing a longtime dream to fruition through her nonprofit, Circle the City.

In a first for Arizona, a nonprofit group is planning a \$1 million, 50-bed medical respite center for homeless patients that's expected to save hospitals millions of dollars.

When a hospital discharges a homeless, uninsured patient, the hospital pays a nursing home or a nurse at a hotel so the patient has a place to heal under supervised care. Sometimes hospitals even keep the patients in their own beds, which can become very costly.

A nonprofit called Circle the City is raising money to renovate a 16,800-square-foot building at 333 W. Indian School Road to house and care for such patients. Hospice of the Valley donated to the cause.

The Arizona Hospital and Healthcare Association doesn't have any data on how many homeless patients are served each year by hospitals across the state, but spokesman [Peter Wertheim](#) said hospitals are seeing an enormous increase in the number of uninsured childless adults.

"Uncompensated care is up over 70 percent since the state froze the Medicaid program July 8, 2007," he said.

Wertheim said he has heard of hospitals putting homeless patients in hotel rooms and sending nurses to check on them periodically.

"We have had to be pretty creative thus far in how we discharge and where the next setting is for these patients," he said.

Things are only going to get worse as the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, which oversees the state Medicaid program in Arizona, just approved a 25-day limit on inpatient stays at hospitals for Medicaid patients — an effort to save about \$85 million a year.

“As these patients reach that 26th day, the payment goes away,” Wertheim said.

He said the state’s first medical respite center couldn’t come at a better time.

“This is great news, as hospitals have tremendous challenges finding appropriate facilities to discharge homeless, medically compromised patients,” he said.

Sister [Adele O’Sullivan](#), founder, president and medical director of Circle the City, said the medical respite center is her longtime dream. She also is a medical doctor and a pharmacist. Her calling has been in medicine since she became a nun with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1968.

She said she hopes the site will be ready this summer. The building also will house the headquarters of Circle the City, which she founded in 2008.

Circle the City has been operating at Maricopa County’s Health Care for the Homeless Clinic, where she worked from 1996 until she started the nonprofit to fill the gaps in health care services that the county clinic could not provide.

She said the mission to provide care to the homeless is powerful.

“We cannot have our sick lying in our streets,” she said.

O’Sullivan said hospitals spend millions of dollars each year to send homeless patients to heal at nursing homes or keep them in their own beds.

“They indicated a willingness to contract with us to provide a service where the patient will be cared for in a much less expensive environment,” she said. “They will be paying a fraction of what it would cost them to keep the patient in an acute care bed.”

[Linda Hunt](#), president and CEO of Dignity Health Arizona, which oversees

St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix and two hospitals in the East Valley, said Circle the City’s respite center will provide hospitals with “a quality and cost-effective discharge option for patients who currently have no stable living situation to return to.”

St. Joseph’s provides more than \$15 million a month in free and discounted care, up from \$8 million a month last year.

O'Sullivan said she has several local grants pending to help pay for the construction of the center, which is being designed by [Linda Delano](#) of Phoenix-based Building Possibilities Inc. and built by C3 Construction Inc., also based in Phoenix.

Circle the City has only two employees: O'Sullivan and Executive Director [Karen Cawley](#). O'Sullivan said she will need to hire 20 to 25 people to staff the 24-hour respite center, including doctors, nurses, case managers, health technicians, drivers and a receptionist. She said she will begin interviews within a month.

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