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Nursing the homeless back to health

Many homeless patients in Los Angeles hospitals aren't discharged in a timely manner because they have nowhere to go to recuperate. Jeff Tyler reports a new program is trying to address the problem.



TESS VIGELAND: A study out of Chicago this week found that providing permanent housing for the homeless ultimately saves taxpayer money. It reduces demand for shelters, recovery programs and hospital stays.

Here in Los Angeles the problem of homeless patients is so acute that hospitals have been caught dumping them on the city's Skid Row. Efforts to criminalize homeless patient dumping have thus far failed. Now, for the first time a coalition is combining resources to address the problem.

Marketplace's Jeff Tyler explains.

JEFF TYLER: When you or I leave the hospital, we generally go home. That's not an option for the roughly 80,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County. They can't recuperate in shelters, which typically make residents leave during the day. And until today, there were only 45 beds available for homeless recuperation in LA county. So many homeless patients stay in acute care at great expense to the hospital.

Mark Gamble: \$14,000 a day -- and that is a conservative estimate from a community hospital perspective. But you go to some of the larger trauma centers, you could be looking at three to four thousand dollars a day.

That's Mark Gamble, with the Hospital Association of Southern California. Today, he was at a Salvation Army shelter to unveil the new Recuperative Care Demonstration Project. It will provide 30 beds. It's important, Gamble says, because keeping the homeless in hospital beds isn't just expensive, but a bad use of resources.

Gamble: Right now in Los Angeles County, we've had ten hospitals close. And paramedics are driving all over the county looking for an open hospital bed.

A coalition of hospitals, philanthropies and local government will cover the \$5.5 million cost of the project. Bruce Chernof is with the Department of Health Services in LA County.

Gamble: In tight fiscal times, bringing departments and organizations together to provide services in a coordinated way is not only good for the families and clients and individuals being served, but it's also a really good use of public and private funds.

Fifteen more beds will be added later this year. If the pilot program is successful, the coalition plans to expand it.

In Los Angeles, I'm Jeff Tyler for Marketplace.