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Nurses In Vanguard Of Aiding Homeless In Southern California

Dedicated nurse leaders anchor a strong public-private collaboration that is bringing mobile healthcare and resources such as food, clothing and shelter to a growing number of homeless or indigent families and individuals in California's affluent Orange County.

Paul Leon, RN, briefly headed a new county program for the homeless in 2007 before becoming executive director of a private nonprofit foundation supported by UC Irvine's Health Care Executive MBA program and numerous nurses, physicians, hospitals and other organizations. The Illumination Foundation, which has grown to a staff of 25 and 1,000 volunteers, offers free medical care and housing assistance to the county's 35,000 homeless — an estimated 21,000 of them children.

The county health initiative, Comprehensive Health Assessment Team for the Homeless, or CHAT-H, is now run by Becky Stone, RN, PHN, supervising public health nurse for Orange County. Stone has a staff of four PHNs contacting the homeless, assessing their health needs and guiding them to supportive resources.

"Because there's no public hospital, the county's indigent population needs a strong outreach service," says Stone, who partners with Leon's foundation and others in a venture that sends a new Mobile Multi-Service Center health van to provide medical, dental and wraparound aid in 18 under-served communities.

Motels for Homeless

Leon says the IF model is unique because it rents motels for housing homeless families and to shelter indigents discharged from hospitals through a county-funded recuperative care program. The discharge program started in January and saved Orange County hospitals \$1.6 million in the first six months, Leon says. The foundation is paid to oversee discharged patients for 30 days and since January, 170 patients have been put in motels, served three meals a day, and monitored for proper medication use.

"We give them a medical home that averages about 10 days, and public health nurses follow them back to their community to make sure they have the services they need," Leon says. The effort has placed about 70% of the patients in stable housing and fewer than 11% wind up re-hospitalized. The program is so successful, it was extended Oct. 1 into Los Angeles County, he says.

Crisis In Spotlight

The homeless crisis — in a wealthy region with more millionaires per capita of any county in the state — has attracted national attention. A recent HBO special on the homeless featured the mobile clinic services and an Oprah show is scheduled to focus on the plight of the county's homeless children.

Since IF started its collaborative outreach, medical care has been dispensed to more than 4,000 homeless and indigent residents and a recent health expo attracted 1,300 people, including unemployed teachers and laborers.

On Sept. 25, about 300 people showed up for free vision services such as eye exams and prescription glasses and included one cancer patient who received a cornea transplant, Leon says. During the 2009-10 H1N1 flu epidemic, medical van nurses inoculated hundreds of vulnerable residents throughout the county.

"We're mobile and can go where we're needed," adds Leon.

For additional information, visit ifhomeless.org.
