

ARIZONA LIVING

GROUP SEEKS MEDICAL RESPITE HELP FOR HOMELESS

by **Connie Midey**

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People leaving the hospital after treatment typically go home to loved ones who will heat up a bowl of soup, change hard-to-reach bandages and make sure chilly shoulders are covered snugly at night.

But the Valley's homeless seldom find such nurturing surroundings after a hospital discharge, at least not without effort.

Their post-hospital recovery could be rosier if Circle the City succeeds in its goal of opening Phoenix's first medical respite center for the homeless. A tea Saturday, featuring a performance by the New Directions Choir of Los Angeles, will benefit the non-profit organization's planned 33-bed facility. The cappella choir's members, all military veterans, are or were homeless.

"The shelter community does the best they can," Circle the City founder Adele O'Sullivan said, "but shelters are not equipped to provide health care, and they're overcrowded. And overcrowding doesn't allow for sick people to get their needs met."

Imagine, she said, a person with a broken leg, slowed by a cast and crutches, standing in a shelter line for meals or struggling to rise from a dormitory cot. Or someone with a surgical incision that must be kept scrupulously clean in a shelter where many share sinks and showers.

These are situations she encounters often. O'Sullivan is a physician and a nun, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, and she has provided health care to homeless people in the Valley since 1996.

Her services have been delivered to ill and injured people living on the streets, as well as to patients who visit Maricopa County's Health Care for the Homeless Clinic in Phoenix.

In December, she resigned as that clinic's medical director and cut her hours in order to devote more time to establishing Circle the City's medical respite center. The group hopes to open the center in 2011.

Since its founding as a public charity in 2008, Circle the City has helped fund health care, mental-health counseling, housing and other services for the homeless. The need for a medical respite center quickly became clear, O'Sullivan said.

After hospitalization for serious illnesses or injuries, homeless people frequently develop complications and require emergency care or readmission to the hospital, she said.

"We just assume hospitals are able to keep homeless people longer or that there's somewhere for them to go, and that's not always the case," O'Sullivan said. "They are discharged to wherever they can find shelter, and then they have to find the other services they need, which might include assistance with dressing changes or breathing treatments. That's not the proper way to care for sick people."