

## Respite program helps homeless with medical problems

By Phaedra Haywood | The New Mexican

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*Photo by: Jane Phillips/The New Mexican*

Like many non-native Santa Feans, Frank Mason moved to the City Different with a dream in his heart.

It was 1985. Mason and his wife-to-be were young, in love and eager to escape what they saw as the conventional attitudes of Alabama where, Mason said, his long hair and earring made him a target for harassment from the authorities and "rednecks."

"I said, 'There's got to be a better place than this,' " he said.

When his lady love inherited a small sum, the pair set out by car hoping to find a new home.

"We drove up [U.S.] 285 in the late summer," when the purple asters and yellow chamisa bushes were blooming, said Mason, who recently turned 50.

"It was post impressionistic. Santa Fe had this magical feeling. So we moved here. And I thought, 'We're moving into a painting.' "

The couple married — in 1991 in a circle of Aspen trees up Pacheco Canyon — bought a three-bedroom home on West Alameda Street and settled in to stay. Mason's wife, Karen Johnston, was a nurse. He was freelance wildlife photographer and did construction and restaurant work, too. "It was a good life," he said.

But in 2001, tragedy struck. Johnston died in a house fire.

That event set Mason on a downward spiral that recently began to turn around because of a new medical respite program at St. Elizabeth Shelter that allows homeless people with medical problems to spend the entire day there, as well as the night. Normally, guests must leave between the hours of 8 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.

Thinking back to the fire and the aftermath, Mason recalled, "I kind of lost my grip. I couldn't hold a job." He said he took his solace in liquor and developed a chronic problem with alcoholism. "Then I became homeless," he said. "I would have a job for a while and save up enough to get a place. But then I would lose it."

Nine years after his wife died, Mason said, he had begun to rebuild his life. He had a maintenance job at the state Department of Transportation and was sharing a month-to-month rental with the first woman he had dated since his wife died. Then she committed suicide by overdosing on pain medication in April. In July, Mason lost his job.

"And then I went back to the streets," he said.

Over the summer, Mason made enough money selling newspapers on street corners to keep himself fed. Then one morning, Mason said, he arrived a little late at his usual post — a median at the intersection of Cerrillos Road and St. Francis Drive — to find an interloper had begun selling the stack of papers that had been dropped off for him.

The two had words, Mason said, and the man "back slapped" him. Mason fell backward off the median, breaking his leg in the process.

He stayed in the hospital for about a week and then went to the Santa Fe Care Center because he couldn't walk. He spent a month there, but at the end of the month he was discharged, although he had nowhere to go.

Some nights, Mason said, he was able to get a bed at St. Elizabeth Shelter, but when the spots are full, latecomers are turned away. Sometimes, Mason said, the difficulty of navigating the streets of Santa Fe in a wheelchair (his leg was still healing) made it difficult for him to make it back to the shelter in time to get a bed. On those nights, he slept outside.

"I just wrapped myself up in a dark blanket and wheeled into the shadows and fell asleep because I had no choice," he said.

In early November, things began to change for Mason.

The shelter normally only provides accommodations at night and for a maximum of 30 days. But in

January shelter officials — recognizing a need for homeless people with medical issues to have a place to recover — created a respite unit in a room that formerly housed women and children. The space had been freed up after Casa Familia, a new shelter specifically aimed at that population, opened in 2010.

St. Elizabeth director Deborah Tang said the program operated informally at first. "Whenever we had space and someone was in need of some convalescing time, we would do that."

In May, the program received a \$25,000 grant from Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center to help cover costs — such as meals, staff and laundry service — associated with long-term rehab of medically compromised homeless residents.

To be accepted as part of the program, someone must have a physical or psychological condition (such as a brain injury) that is serious enough that a doctor has recommended bed rest.

Once accepted into the program, residents are allowed to stay in the shelter all day until they recover.

Shelter staff also help make sure people in the program take prescribed medications and get connected with counseling and health care services for the homeless.

For example, Mason, who has been sober for three months and has begun to walk again with the help of a cane, is now receiving counseling for post traumatic stress disorder. Staff at St. Elizabeth are also helping him look for a permanent home and he's considering going back to school to study cultural anthropology.

Lewis Hendrix, 57, who is recovering at St. Elizabeth from double hernia surgery, said the surgeon who performed his operation told him he wouldn't have operated on Hendrix unless he had somewhere to go for the four to six weeks it takes to heal after such a procedure.

Hendrix said being able to stay at St. Elizabeth has been "a blessing."

"My whole life did a big turnaround because of this place," said Hendrix, a former oil driller who recently enrolled in Santa Fe Community College classes as the first step in pursuing his dream to become a counselor for troubled teens.

In addition to helping people, the medical respite program is a big money-saver for Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center and county taxpayers who fund indigent care at the hospital.

"These people all could have recovered in the hospital," said case manager Shane Lampman. "But it would cost the community and the hospital money, where we can do it for a lot less money. I guess that's the idea. It's a money-saving thing for the hospital."

Tang said 28 people received "289 bed nights" worth of shelter as part of the program between June and September.

The per-day, per-room charge at Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center ranges from \$695 to more than \$2,000, depending on the room location and type, according to Christus St. Vincent spokesman Arturo Delgado.

Delgado said the \$25,000 grant to the homeless shelter is awarded on an annual basis. The hospital gave about \$504,000 in grants to various community health care partners in 2011. St. Elizabeth also received a \$40,000 grant from Christus St. Vincent for "transition counseling services."

Mason said having a solid place to regain his strength and make himself presentable when he does go out into the community has helped him regain some of the self-esteem he lost while living in a wheelchair on the streets.

"This place takes care of me better than any relative I've ever had," he said. "People usually avert their gaze once they realize you are homeless. But now when I go out. I'm just a guy with a leg problem."

*Contact Phaedra Haywood at 986-3068 or [phaywood@sfnewmexican.com](mailto:phaywood@sfnewmexican.com)*