

## Help for the homeless Daily Planet facility for recovery reopens with more services to offer

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David Nelson, Maureen Neal and Peter Prizzio (from left) prepare for the reopening of the Daily Planet Medical Respite Program.  
Photo By: MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

### Daily Planet Medical

#### Respite Program

**Location:** 1617 Front St., Richmond

**Opening:** Opens for referrals at 8 a.m. today, with an open house set for 2 to 6 p.m. on Aug. 6

**For more:** For details or referrals, call (804) 329-1751 or fax (804) 329-1752

By WILL JONES

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

A 21-bed facility in Richmond that gives homeless people a place to recover after an injury or illness reopens today with more than new blue carpet and freshly painted walls.

The Daily Planet Medical Respite Program, based in Highland Park, is being restarted by the nonprofit Daily Planet after shutting down March 1. The group, which focuses primarily on health care, substance abuse and mental-health services for the homeless, plans to provide more comprehensive care than had been available on site.

"This was really a shelter" previously, said Peter Prizzio, executive director of the Daily Planet. "We look at it as more of a respite program that offers a lot more services than were offered before."

The center is geared for homeless people who are too sick or frail for shelters. They're able to stay up to 30 days after being referred by hospitals, doctors or the central intake unit of the area's homeless services.

The center will provide basic medical convalescence services, as well as programs to address patients' psychological and social issues. Some will focus on diet and the proper use of medications and hospital emergency rooms.

"We want to be able to take the stress off the emergency rooms" for

non-emergency visits, said Maureen Neal, director of development and external affairs for the Daily Planet.

Freedom House, which focuses on feeding and housing programs for the homeless, had run the respite program since 2001 but decided early this year that it could no longer handle the complicated mental-health issues that had become an increasing part of the caseload.

When the center closed, Freedom House officials were hopeful that the Daily Planet could restart it this summer.

"I am ecstatic that someone in the homeless-services providers network stepped forward and was able to reopen a vital program like respite, to meet the needs of those that we served," said Melba Gibbs, executive director of Freedom House. She added that Daily Planet is a perfect fit because of the health services it offers.

Prizzio said he worked with area hospitals to verify a need for the program. He said the Bon Secours Richmond Health System, HCA Richmond Hospitals and the VCU Health System will fund about half of the program's \$220,000 annual budget, with the United Way, local Community Services Boards and others contributing the other half. Meals on Wheels will provide two meals a day as in-kind support.

One of the funding commitments is limited to a year, but that's no problem, Prizzio said. He said government funding is often that tenuous and that a renewal will largely "be determined if we demonstrate a value to them."

David C. Nelson, a registered nurse who has worked with the homeless in Richmond, Washington and New Mexico since 1983, will serve as the program manager. The staff also will include a full-time case manager and fewer than a dozen medical technical assistants working on rotation.

"My gut tells me by the end of the week we're going to be getting calls, and we'll be filled in a couple of weeks," he said. "The need is that great."

For now, referrals will be accepted from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Nelson hinted that he'll be a compassionate but firm host, noting the center would have no cable or satellite - only broadcast -- TV. "We're not going to use the TV as a babysitter."

Officials said they aren't aware of any crises from the center having been closed for a few months. They believe most people who would have been referred to the program had their hospital stays extended or moved prematurely into shelters.

Still, Neal said she had heard of one man who was found recovering in an alley. He was lying on a board to stabilize his frail body until a friend opened his home.

"He couldn't leave him on the streets," she said, "and that's what this guy was trying to do -- recuperate on a piece of plywood."

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