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Medical respite for homeless

By Jill Magri, Mary Kay Sweeney and Julie Van Winkle
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IT MIGHT seem ironic that in these difficult times, when it's hard to garner donations no matter how good the cause, a partnership of concerned organizations was able to raise money for something that Marin hasn't had until now- a transitional safety net respite program for homeless people.

It could not be more timely with 1,770 homeless people counted as part of Marin's recent "Point-in-Time Count," a snapshot of homeless families and individuals.

Begun in November, the Homeless Medical Respite Project provides homeless patients discharged from Marin County hospitals with an independent living respite facility at Homeward Bound, where they can recuperate until they are ready to be on their own.

The Project is a collaborative effort of Homeward Bound, the county Department of Health and Human Services, Kaiser Permanente San Rafael Medical Center, and Sutter Health's Marin General and Novato Community hospitals. The Ritter Center and Marin Community Clinics are also partners in the program.

Two double-occupancy studio apartments have been designated at Homeward Bound, providing up to four homeless residents a clean and safe place to recover and get the care they need. An additional transitional bed is being provided in local motels.

When most of us are discharged from the hospital, we get our prescriptions and head home to bed and rest. If we need a follow-up appointment with our doctor or if we require any additional attention, we make that happen, often with the
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support of family and friends.

For someone who is homeless and living out of a car, on the street, or under a bridge, taking proper care after a hospital discharge can be difficult if not impossible.

Because of environmental challenges, a wound can easily become infected. And it's easier for health conditions to return and possibly become chronic when you are without a warm and dry place to eat and sleep and without adequate nutrition. Then it's back to the emergency room and maybe another stay in the hospital.

Marin's homeless residents benefit from having time - three weeks as an average length of respite stay - to recover from illness supported by the caring oversight of a case manager and the Marin Community Clinics.

They also have the chance while recuperating to link up to other community services to improve their health status. Similar programs in other communities have demonstrated that respite patients are better able to enroll in health insurance, get connected with permanent housing and employment assistance, sign up for treatment programs, and care for their own condition at discharge.

And all Marin residents benefit because scarce hospital beds and expensive medical resources are freed up for those needing hospital-level acute care.

The Respite Project was developed in response to Assembly Bill 2745, which calls for each county in California to discuss how it can better meet the needs of homeless patients ready for discharge from the hospital and no longer in need of acute hospital care.

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Additional partners in the project are: Project Independence, AB 2745 Hospital Discharge Committee, California Hospital Association-North Bay Council, Bridges Committee, HUD McKinney Planning Group, Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy, Hospice by the Bay and Community Action Marin Street Outreach.

So, what are the chances for a new program like the Homeless Medical Respite Project to raise the money it needs in today's economy? So far, things are looking pretty good. The project has received a total of \$100,000 from Kaiser, Sutter, the county and the Marin Community Foundation. This money will keep it running for nine months while plans for on-going sustainability are finalized.

That says something about the vital need it addresses, and it also says something about the caring community in which we live.

Perhaps the worst of times have a way of bringing out the best in people. If that's irony, let's have more of it.

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For more information about the Homeless Medical Respite Care Project, contact Mary Kay Sweeney, Homeward Bound, at 382-3532.