

Seattle Opens Medical Respite Center for Homeless

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Homeless people in King County will now have a safe place to recuperate after a hospital visit. A new medical respite center is opening in September and will provide facilities for those needing a place off the streets to heal.

The respite center is the result of a collaborative effort between seven hospitals in the region and Public Health-Seattle & King County. Seattle Housing Authority, United Way of King County and other county departments are also partners in this joint venture.

"A couple of hospitals approached us over five years ago with the problem of needing a place, or additional capacity, for homeless people when they get out of the hospital," said Katie Ross of the public health department.

A respite center is essential to King County's health system because of the number of homeless people in Seattle. According to the public health department, "It is a more cost-effective and appropriate setting for patients who no longer need hospital-level care." It will benefit taxpayers as well.

"A hospital can't just discharge somebody to the streets," said Virginia Felton, director of communications and strategic planning for Seattle Housing Authority. "That's not necessarily good for those (patients) and it's also very costly for the hospital."

It costs about \$200 a day for a patient to stay in the center, compared to an average of \$1,500 for inpatient hospital care.

The respite center is located on the seventh floor of the Jefferson Terrace building, a high-rise that provides housing for the low-income population. Seattle's Public Housing Authority is leasing the floor to the public health department so they can work with hospitals to run this center.

Residents at the building were involved in the planning and construction of the project so they

could ensure their living space remained undisturbed. An elevator was built to provide a separate entrance into the center so that residents in the building will be comfortable with the new arrangement, said Felton.

The Jefferson Terrace building is located within blocks of three major hospitals, including Harborview that is directly across the street. Harborview will administer care to the respite users, said Ross.

But the center will offer more than just a place to heal. Felton said that during their stay, patients will be provided with services that can help them improve their living situation.

According to a press release, “the respite program will have a sustained focus on connecting clients to permanent housing and other essential services like primary care and behavioral health.”

“It gives people the opportunity to look at other options for permanent housing or even transitional housing,” said Felton.

Tom Tierney, Seattle Housing Authority’s executive director, was one of the speakers at the opening ceremony on Aug.2. He said that the respite center is one way that “SHA can contribute to serving our community's homeless population as part of the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness.” Felton agrees that the Committee to End Homelessness, which is behind the Ten Year Plan, played a major role in bringing about creation of the center.

The apartments in the building have been remodeled into 16 client rooms with 34 beds. Clients will stay for an average of 21 days. About 500 clients will go through the facility over the course of a year, said Ross.

“The idea of respite care is one that has been tried around the country and has been very successful,” said Felton. “It gives people a real opportunity to get better.”

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