

Seeking aid for Springfield's homeless ill

Group will discuss the possibility of a respite facility for the homeless

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Written by

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Citing a growing homeless population and the community's generosity, a local group will convene for the first time today to discuss the establishment of a place where homeless people too ill to recuperate on the streets — but not sick or injured enough to remain hospitalized — can recuperate.

Joyce Stevenson, a registered nurse and Missouri State University student, and Michelle McCoy, executive director of the social service agency One Door, arranged the meeting that has drawn interest from more than two dozen social service agencies, health care organizations and advocates for the poor.

The group, assembling this time by invitation, will meet at One Door offices on East Pacific and eventually engage the public in the discussion.

Stevenson said she'd mulled the establishment of this "Medical Respite Project" since August. Most everyone she spoke to thought it was a great idea, she said, but no one was saying, "Hey, let me help with that."

"We thought the next step was to step out there and ask for people to come to a meeting and see if we can spark some interest," Stevenson said. "We're hoping to get some interested parties working together on a medical respite and someone interested in overseeing it."

In July and again in August, the News-Leader published stories about homeless people released from hospitals having no place to go and heal.

A man in the July story was released from the hospital three days after he fell from his mo-ped and a guardrail punctured his brain. Surgeons had replaced a part of his skull with a titanium plate.

The August story cited medical respite advocates who said the facilities can help relieve overburdened hospitals. Respite care costs, they said, average \$240 per day, they say; hospital rooms, \$1,500.

The facilities also can cut hospital stays in half, lower readmission rates and reduce the number of return emergency room visits, Nashville-based Healthcare for the Homeless said.

Stevenson said she'd heard from representatives of Mercy and Cox hospitals who plan to attend. Cox North was particularly interested, she said, because the hospital sits right in the middle of the homeless population.

"I've worked there since 1988," Stevenson said, "and I know the need there."

Representatives from Springfield Victory Mission and The Kitchen Inc. at the Missouri Hotel, also in north Springfield, expressed excitement about the meeting, she said. Other organizations sending RSVPs include representatives from Greene County government and the United Way of the Ozarks, she said.

Of the 32 invitations mailed, about 25 people responded, some of them indicating they were bringing one or two people with them.

Springfield has made do by offering brief stays in shelters or motel vouchers, but that's just triage, Stevenson said. Those aren't answers.

"You can't just put someone in a hotel by themselves and hope that works out," she said.