

Source: <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/251/story/515199.html>
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Ga. program's recovery unit aids injured homeless

By DIONNE WALKER - Associated Press Writer --
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ATLANTA --

At 52, John Silver has a history of strokes, heart trouble and a cough that echoes through his large chest.

What he doesn't have is a home. So when doctors told him he needed a heart procedure, he figured he'd recover in a noisy shelter or worse.

Instead, he wheeled a walker across a sunny room Wednesday at Gateway Center downtown as one of the first patients in a pilot program that gives injured Atlanta area homeless a peaceful alternative to recovery on hard park benches or beneath bridges.

The new 19-bed recuperative unit is an effort of Saint Joseph's Mercy Care Services designed to help wounded homeless while saving Grady Memorial Hospital millions spent caring for patients with nowhere to go.

The six-month pilot will focus on Grady; organizers hope to expand to facilities in places like Cobb, Douglas and Paulding counties.

The program is expected to save the hospital about \$1 million a year.

Two patients occupied the unit Wednesday, with another patient with a fractured leg expected by nightfall.

A week ago, they might have been discharged to a shelter.

"Shelters tend to be noisy, smelly. They can be very chaotic," said Silver, on bed rest after a cardiac catheterization.

Most also require visitors to leave by sunrise.

"If you just had surgery and you're trying to recover, the last thing your doctor would want is for you to have to get up at 7 a.m. and sleep on a bench," said Tom Andrews, president of Saint Joseph's.

Grady will refer patients meeting basic guidelines: homeless, male and too well for continued hospitalization, but too ill to return to life on the street.

At Gateway, patients will get a small suite and access to the unit's four-person team of medical workers. It includes a nurse to handle things like refrigerating medicine and coordinating appointments, and a case worker to assess one's personal circumstances.

Andrews said organizers hope the patients will be willing to address other problems in their lives.

"Some of them have been on the street for years and haven't been willing to work with the system," Andrews said.

Grady provided \$211 million in indigent and charity care in 2007, including care for Atlanta's vast, typically uninsured homeless community. Their ailments range from bronchitis to diabetes, and may require aftercare organizers say drives them back to hospitals.

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"Unless these people have a place to go, you're wasting a lot of money because they're bound to fall sick again," said Protip Biswas, executive director of United Way Atlanta's Regional Commission on Homelessness.

The organization is helping fund the new unit.

Other frail patients can't leave the hospital and remain in expensive beds, said Charlene Turner, administrative director for care management at Grady.

"Or we may send them to a transitional housing facility where often, Grady may have to cover that cost," she said. The program "saves us on getting them out of a hospital bed quicker."

Organizers cite similar programs in cities like Chicago, Washington DC and Savannah, where Union Mission's nine-year-old program helped save area hospitals \$26.9 million in 2007, a spokeswoman said.

The Gateway Center itself is a former jail, a fact reflected in the harsh metal toilets, miniature rooms and tiny curtained doorways of the new recuperative unit.

But features like a large bathroom with a roll-in shower make life more comfortable.

Along the perimeter, cushy green chairs invite weary backsides and walls freshly painted a cheerful yellow lift spirits.

"You're moving faster today!" shouted case worker Natasha Williams as Silver shuffled past, on his way to recovery.