

# O.C. homeless given a place to rest and heal

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Nurse Julia Cross checks Kyle Johanson's blood pressure at a motel in Buena Park. Johanson, who is homeless, is living in the motel and receiving treatment for free while recovering from an abscess wound.

KEN STEINHARDT, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

There is a wound 2 centimeters deep in Kyle Johanson's hip.

The former plumber usually lives on the Santa Ana streets, around McFadden Avenue and Harbor Boulevard, where he buys the heroin that caused the deep red boil. At night, Johanson, 32, rests in a sleeping bag on sheets of cardboard underneath a bridge or behind a Shoe City.

But for the first time in four years, while the boil heals, he has a space of his own: a sparse motel room in Buena Park with a full-sized bed, a TV to watch reruns of Dodgers games, frozen meals, a loaf of sliced wheat bread and a box of Cheerios.

Daily, a nurse checks his blood pressure and dispenses his medication, methadone to soothe his heroin withdrawals. A home health care provider tends to the boil, which was cut open and drained at a Fountain Valley Regional Medical Center a week earlier.

"I'm taking a shower. I'm waking up in a bed. Instead of worrying about where I'm going to get my next drug, I have people helping me," Johanson said.

The boarding, the food, the health care is provided or arranged by the Orange County nonprofit Illumination Foundation – it's all free for Johanson.

Without the foundation's care, Johanson said he would have gone straight back to the streets. He would have faced the temptation to inject heroin. He would have had no sanitary place to clean the

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dressing on his wound and no one to bring him to doctors appointments. He would, most likely, have wound up back in the hospital with an infection or a new abscess wound.

Homeless men and women cycle in and out of emergency rooms – some making upward of 40 visits in one month seeking treatment for minor illnesses, mental health conditions, and, sometimes, simply to socialize, because they do not have anywhere else to turn. They are twice as likely to be readmitted to the hospital if they are discharged to the street rather than to recuperative care, according to the Illumination Foundation, the only group in Orange County offering recuperative care.

With about 12,700 homeless men and women in Orange County, that puts a big financial burden on hospitals.

But it costs about \$2,000 more per day to keep a homeless person in the hospital than it does to pay for their recuperative care, according to the foundation. So for the first time, CalOptima, which provides health insurance to the county's poor, is reimbursing hospitals to send their homeless patients to the foundation.

It set aside \$500,000 for this year, enough funding for 330 people to each stay an average of 10 days, Mike Ruane, chief of strategy and public affairs for CalOptima, said. But the budget could grow if there's enough demand, he said.

In the past, hospitals had to pick up the tab themselves, and "unfortunately a lot of times that decision went to that CFO," Illumination Foundation president Paul Leon said.

"They were making hospital decisions and not human lives decisions. Now they can say, 'Fiscally it's the right thing to do,'" he said.

Plagued by chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and bipolar disorder, Bobby Louis Bondon, 60, said he "practically lived" at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance before he was referred to the Illumination Foundation by the nonprofit Housing Works in Los Angeles.

"Everybody I come in contact with here, they're on top of it. I might be wheezing and a staff will come up and say, 'Have you hit your inhaler?' 'Oh no, I have not.' I've been stabilizing my blood pressure. On a regular basis, I take my medication. I get a lot of rest."

The foundation is trying to help find him and Thao Vu, 40, permanent places to live. Right now, both are staying temporarily at the nonprofit's shelter-like housing in Santa Fe Springs. There, they can use computers to apply for jobs, there are Crock-Pots and a barbecue and their medications are safe in a locker and dispensed to them by medical staff.

Vu, who was homeless and living at the Santa Ana Civic Center, has HIV and other infections. He said he had visited UC Irvine Medical Center three times in the last three months

"It's a very hard life," he said.