

Philly's homeless to get a much needed recovery center

Posted: Tuesday, November 12, 2013, 12:16 AM



SANDRA GUILLORY / DEPAUL HOUSE

The ailing homeless will have this clean, comfortable setting at the Depaul House to recover.

IN EVERY emergency room in every hospital in Philadelphia, doctors treat ailing homeless men and women, and then send them back into the streets a few hours later because they aren't sick enough to keep in the hospital.

But because the streets are no place to recover, it doesn't take long before they come right back to the ER, sometimes even sicker.

These doctors and nurses know it's inhumane and costly, but they've had few options. Until now.

Come January, Philadelphia will finally have a clean and safe place for homeless patients to recuperate, with a six-bed medical respite center in the former chapel at Depaul House in East Germantown.

So, you thought we already had a place like this, given that there are thousands of homeless in Philadelphia, and that many use emergency rooms as their primary, or only, health-care source? Join the club.

While hanging out in April at the Hub of Hope, a seasonal care center inside Suburban Station for the homeless, I met one of its volunteer physicians, Bon Ku. Dr. Ku works the Jefferson Hospital emergency room, where he repeatedly treats many of the city's homeless in a revolving door of emergency-room health care that's mirrored in ERs across the country.

Between treating a woman with foot pain and a man who had been living on the streets with a gaping hole in his belly, Dr. Ku mentioned that for years he'd been advocating for a respite center for the homeless, who he's come to know by name and ailment. It wasn't exactly a new idea. Other major cities across the country had recovery centers and were seeing a 50 percent reduction in emergency-room use among those with access to them.

So what was wrong with us? It wasn't that people didn't care, or didn't think it was a good idea. It came down to what it often comes down to: money. But as I wrote in a column about the need for a recovery center, surely it made sense to find the money now for something that would save the city money in the long run.

Shortly after that column, Dr. Ku said that discussions about launching a one-year pilot program started to gain momentum. The Office of Supportive Housing put \$30,000 toward renovating the former chapel at Depaul House, on Sprague Street near Cheltenham Avenue, into the city's first medical respite center. The renovation was also made possible with a \$5,000 grant from the Women's Board of Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, he said.

Depaul and the Public Health Management Corp., which will coordinate the center, will man it with on-site nurses and other staff. They will also have a social worker to confer with the patients about their plans after they're discharged so they can help address the revolving door of medical care.

"This is such an important step in caring for the city's homeless population," said Melissa Fox, PHMC's managing director of health. "Our goal is to expand. We know the need is way beyond six beds."

Sandra Guillory, program director for Depaul House, an agency that serves the homeless, was tending to every detail to make the center as comfortable as possible when we talked yesterday.

"In other cities, respite centers could be a few motel rooms," she said. "We want to provide a high standard of care."

Above all, the pilot program has to prove sustainable. Dr. Ku said he hopes fellow doctors and nurses will volunteer their time. Step right up, folks.

The center also needs more partners willing to help fund it past the first year. Hospitals sending patients to the recovery center will be asked to pay a \$200 per diem for some patients - a lot cheaper than an ER visit or a night's stay at the hospital.

There are still a lot of details to work out. But for now, this is a major win for men and women in this city with far too few options. It's also a win for a tenacious doctor who wouldn't give up on a good idea.

"It's like a dream come true," Dr. Ku said. "This is one of the few viable options for some of the most underserved populations in Philadelphia."

Email: ubinas@phillynews.com

Phone: 215-854-5943

On Twitter: @NotesFromHel

On Facebook: Helen.Ubinas

Read more at

http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20131112_Philly_s_homeless_to_get_a_much_needed_recovery_center.html#8ZACCyc7b2PZR7zG.99