

Medical respite program would help heal the homeless

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Written by

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Kraft retiree Janice Pickel, 68, has congestive heart failure. An assortment of financial problems led to Pickel and her husband, Ronnie, being evicted from their Springfield apartment.

They lived in a motel and then briefly in their 2004 Ford Taurus which they parked near Mercy Hospital Springfield, going in the waiting room to warm up and eating from the hospital vending machines. The conditions aggravated Pickel's health problems.

"She's been in the hospital quite a bit," said Ronnie Pickel, who is now living in Salvation Army housing with his wife.

Medical professionals and advocates for the homeless have been discussing for months starting what they say would be a "medical respite" program in the Springfield area. These programs typically provide acute and post-acute medical care for homeless people who are too ill or frail to recover from a physical illness or injury on the streets, but not sick enough to be in the hospital, [according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, a Nashville nonprofit.](#)

Pilot programs to provide short-term housing for homeless people who have recently been discharged from area hospitals could start soon at space provided by two area organizations, The Salvation Army and The Kitchen.

Carol Daniel, a registered nurse and clinical instructor at Missouri State University, said the program could connect homeless people with primary care doctors. She said the medical respite program wouldn't have a medical director.

"Our goal is not to do care per se," Daniel said.

Jeff Smith, the social services director for The Salvation Army, said the organization is considering providing about seven beds for men and is getting information from area hospitals.

"It's not a for-sure 'yes,' " Smith said.

Rorie Orgeron, the chief executive office of The Kitchen, said the nonprofit could house women or families needing medical respite care in the Ollis Building on Commercial Street, which had been previously used for homeless teens. Orgeron said The Kitchen board has authorized putting together a possible budget for the program and seeking financing. Funds from The Kitchen would not be used.

Orgeron said people in the pilot program would have to be able to get themselves to doctors' appointments.

At the Missouri Hotel, resident Michelle "Breezy" Hurley relies on help from other residents to change the bandages around a drainage tube and to help straighten up her room. Hurley, 49, said she has been treated for colon cancer and had multiple hernia surgeries.

The Kitchen operates the Missouri Hotel, a shelter for area women and children.

"I'm blessed to be at the Missouri Hotel and have people who are helping me," Hurley said.

Talks about providing some type of help for homeless people with serious medical problems started after the News-Leader wrote in July 2012 about a homeless man who was treated at Mercy Hospital Springfield. The man, Roger Sellman, had part of his skull replaced with a titanium plate after a moped accident. He stayed in motels with his fiancée with help from area charities after his discharge.

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council said the minimum level of care in medical respite programs includes clinical assessment, oversight, minor interventions and 24-hour bed rest.

A study published in May in the Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved found that medical respite programs reduce hospital readmissions. Most medical respite programs are small, with fewer than 20 beds, are operated by nonprofit organizations and have average lengths of stay of two to four weeks.

At least 60 medical respite programs are in the United States and Canada, said Sabrina Edgington, the program and policy specialist for the Homeless Council.

The level of medical care provided varies by location. In Boston, which has had a respite program since 1985, respite care for the homeless includes 24-hour nursing supervision, daily visits by nurse practitioners or physician assistants and on-site dental and psychiatric care.

In Kansas City, a five-bed program operated by The Salvation Army and St. Luke's Hospital provides care for patients discharged from St. Luke's, [according to a directory of programs](#). The program provides 24-hour room and board, transportation to doctor's visits, home health care and access to social services. The typical stay is three weeks.

Daniel said the pilot programs in Springfield, if started, would include some type of medical assessments and monitoring. Daniel said she's seen people who have suffered heart attacks and had stents implanted who are at Bill's Place, a drop-in service for the homeless, the next day.

"They need to have some place that's safe for them to be," Daniel said.