

Respite is home care for people with no home: An Interview with Dr. Adele O'Sullivan, HCH Phoenix By Ansell Horn

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Dr. Adele O'Sullivan, Medical Director,
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Health Care for the Homeless Program

When Adele O'Sullivan graduated from High School she knew that she had a calling, to take her vows and join the Sisters of St. Joseph; "I was attracted by how close they were to God and the joy in them."

The sisters sent Adele to Tucson, Arizona, in 1971, to attend a pharmacy school. Upon graduation, she practiced as a pharmacist for 5 years. The sisters' interest in ministries affecting the poor impelled Adele to attend medical school in Arizona. Following medical school, Adele worked at a state psychiatric facility and at rural clinics. In 1996, Dr. O'Sullivan was asked to serve as medical director of the Phoenix Health Care for the Homeless Project.

The first year there, I thought, 'what am I doing here?' Health Care for the Homeless was operating out of a shabby little run-down building. The roof leaked. We had three exam rooms. The waiting room was so small the line of people went out the door to the curb. But it was always clean and the staff tried to give outstanding care.

The staff recognized that "Respite care was our homeless service's biggest need." To accommodate sick homeless people, eight shelter beds were assigned to the medical clinic to use at their discretion. People could rest in their shelter bed instead of getting thrown out during the day."

Like other agencies serving the homeless people of Phoenix, the shelter was in an old building that had been intended, 20 years earlier, as a temporary site. Various homeless service agencies—the medical clinic, the shelter, the homeless dining room, the interfaith chaplaincy office, etc—were all located in buildings that were falling apart. They decided to work together, to build something new.

In 2005, after five years of fundraising, the agencies established the Maricopa County Human Service Campus where a range of homeless services can be accessed in one

location. Some organizations were stationed in a stand-alone facility and others shared a space.

The Health Care for the Homeless clinic, located on the campus, has an adjoining space for 10 medical respite beds. Now, Adele says, she is ready to create a free-standing respite facility. Land was donated to a non-profit organization called Circle the City for this purpose. Circle the City is in the legal process of accepting ownership.

Members of Dr. O’Sullivan’s church became interested in her work and raised funds for the clinic as well as special projects—housing homeless families with children and raising funds for a medical respite care facility. In addition, Circle the City, led by a representative board, raised over \$150,000 in one day during its last annual fundraiser. The Board’s energy attracted other people and organizations in the community.

A committee was created to work on a respite proposal. “Our plan is to start with 25 beds in a facility that is expandable to 50 beds. We are looking at some kind of round-the-clock nursing care, with RNs on at least one shift,” says Dr. O’Sullivan. Circle the City is currently negotiating with state authorities for licensure for the facility which will partly determine its nature. The purpose of the respite program is to provide “a home away from home for sick people” and “home care for people with no home.”

Learn more about Circle the City at www.circlethecity.org



Maricopa County Human Service Campus

