

Santa Clara County hospitals team up to help homeless

**By Deborah Lohse
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Homeless patients who can't legally be discharged to the streets will soon have a place to recuperate, thanks in part to five area hospitals.

The so-called "medical respite program" is the first major initiative to come out of a blue-ribbon commission on homelessness chaired by Santa Clara County and San Jose leaders. The county board of supervisors approved it at their this meeting.

The program comes about a year after the passage of state legislation that puts greater obligations on hospitals to come up with appropriate discharge plans for homeless patients. That law passed after accusations that some Southern California hospitals were "dumping" homeless people - in some cases still wearing hospital gown - on Skid Row or elsewhere.

Jennifer Loving, chief executive of EHC LifeBuilders, which runs the shelter that will house up to 15 such patients in San Jose, hailed the program as humane and vitally important. "The life expectancy for chronically ill homeless folks is only 45 years old," she said.

Santa Clara County's program will cost \$650,000 a year, most of it paid for out of federal homeless health-care grant funds. Five hospitals - Valley Medical Center, El Camino Hospital, Regional Medical Center, O'Connor Hospital and Stanford Hospital - will each chip in \$25,000 as well.

Under the program, hospitals will be able to discharge homeless patients to special rooms at EHC's Boccardo Reception Center shelter on Little Orchard Street. There, they can recuperate for an expected average of 14 days.

Homeless patients need recuperating time for all sorts of things, including heart attacks, minor surgery or amputations, said Malinda Mitchell, the former CEO of Stanford Medical Center who provided consulting help to the county on the issue. "It's impossible to do that on the street."

While the shelter itself won't be licensed to offer medical care to its recuperating clients, funds for the program will help pay for longer hours and more days of service at an adjacent Valley Medical Center clinic, which currently serves some shelter residents three days a week.

The program also will include a full-time clinical nurse who will help screen incoming patients, as well as a part-time benefits counselor and part-time psychologist who can help document disabilities so qualifying homeless folks can get federal Supplemental Security Income.

"The respite center is a beach head to get them connected into these other services - social services, housing, SSI," said Dr. Larry Kwan, Medical Director for the Valley Homeless Healthcare Program.

Experts told the board of supervisors today that area hospitals house 50 to 55 homeless patients each month, with the county's Valley Medical Center bearing the biggest brunt. If hospitals can't come up with a discharge plan for them, homeless patients stay longer in acute-care beds - leading to a backlog of bed space for emergency-room patients and others.

Currently, hospital staff must either arrange for homeless patients to go to shelters that require them to leave during daytime hours, or arrange for motel vouchers or temporary stays with relatives or friends.

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