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Homeless get second chance

Program helps turn lives around

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Michael Wiese's road to redemption began in an ambulance after he shattered a hip socket during another of many nights of boozing.

“The moment was when they picked me up on the gurney, put me in the ambulance and closed the doors,” said Wiese, 42. “Right when they closed the doors, I looked up and said, 'I'm sorry.' I knew Jesus was up there somewhere and I asked, if he wasn't too mad at me, would he please take over my life, because I obviously was failing really bad.”

Wiese, who has been homeless, and addicted to drugs or alcohol for nearly half his life, needed a change. It came through a collaborative pilot program involving Scripps Health and Catholic Charities that has helped a small sample of homeless patients recover from their injuries or illnesses and get a fresh start.

Wiese is living in a recovery home, has resumed college and has been sober for nearly nine months.

“Without the program, my life would be totally different – 180 degrees different,” said Wiese, whose injury is on the mend.

The program provides homeless patients with short-term lodging so they can recover after leaving the hospital. During the patient's convalescence, a social worker from Catholic Charities works to place the person in a recovery program to deal with drug or alcohol addiction, employment, housing or other needs to help start the rebuilding of a life.

Typically, ill or injured homeless people are brought to hospital emergency rooms where they are treated, leaving an unpaid bill when released. They usually return to the street, where their injuries or illnesses flare up again because they had insufficient time to heal.

The program, implemented in July 2007, is designed to stop the revolving door that ensnares the chronic homeless and costs hospitals and taxpayers money.

Dr. Davis Cracroft, senior medical director at Scripps Mercy Hospital, has seen the impact of repeat homeless patients in the facility's bottom line. The Hillcrest hospital, because of its proximity to downtown San Diego's homeless population, is a frequent destination for ambulances transporting street people in need of medical aid.

Last year, the Catholic nonprofit hospital dispensed \$66 million in unreimbursed health care, Cracroft said. Hospitals are required by law to treat uninsured and under-insured patients.

Cracroft said the unpaid bills come at the expense of taxpayers who have to pay higher health care costs. For the hospital, the red ink translates into an inability to hire new nurses or purchase the latest medical equipment, he said.

The pilot program for homeless patients is an attempt to stanch the financial hemorrhaging.

Scripps Health awarded Catholic Charities \$40,000 in the 2007-08 fiscal year to provide housing and services to some homeless patients after they were discharged. A total of 73 patients were served, with 65 percent of them eventually entering a recovery program instead of returning to the streets, Cracroft said.

Only two of the patients had return visits to the hospital's emergency room, he said.

The program was so successful that Scripps increased funding to \$50,000 for this fiscal year. Long-term, the hope is to get other community hospitals to pool their money with Scripps so a greater number of chronically homeless patients can participate.

"It's good cost-avoidance for the hospital, and it's a more humane way to treat our patients or any human being," Cracroft said.

Academic studies have shown that such programs save money in the long run. Sister RayMonda DuVall, executive director of Catholic Charities, said the pilot program is also in line with a tenet of Catholic social teaching: See the dignity of the individual.

"We've been trying to get a program like this for years, and finally the stars lined up and Scripps Mercy said let's try it out as a pilot program," DuVall said.

She said many homeless people who wind up in the emergency room have chronic alcohol or drug problems or are mentally ill. Catholic Charities' case workers expect those who enter the program to aspire to three goals: staying clean and sober, living in a place that supports sobriety, and, for those who can, finding work.

"This is a first step," DuVall said. "It takes years for significant change to take place, but someone has to be there in the very beginning."

Clinical social worker Charles Mador, who has worked for Scripps Mercy for more than 14 years, screens the patients before referring them to Catholic Charities. Mador's assessment is no-nonsense.

"I'm looking for somebody who wants to change their life," he said. "If they're looking for three hots and a cot, this ain't it."

After many self-described "failures," Wiese decided he was finally ready for real change after he was seriously injured Nov. 29.

Wiese had gotten out of jail that day, and he and two other released inmates decided to share a bottle of gin to celebrate. After imbibing, one of them had an idea: Go to the San Diego Convention Center and shake off the rust from jail by running the steps.

The three ran up the steps all right, but on the race down the steps, Wiese pitched forward, landing awkwardly on his left leg and fracturing his left hip socket.

The four days he spent in the hospital following two surgeries gave him time to take stock. Alcohol or drugs had helped ruin an Air Force enlistment, college and jobs, and had gotten him kicked out of apartments. He decided it was time to change.

He got an assist from the pilot program when he was discharged from the hospital.

"Having Catholic Charities put me in a hotel said that somebody actually cares about me, that somebody cares for me enough to put me someplace to help me," he said. "I thought, 'Maybe I can make it now.'"

After providing him with two weeks of lodging in an inexpensive hotel, Catholic Charities helped him enter a long-term recovery program at the San Diego Rescue Mission. He entered Christmas Eve and has been there since, immersing himself in his religious faith and re-establishing ties with his family in Columbus, Ohio.

"I hadn't talked to my parents for 17 years," he said. "We're closer now than we've ever been."

He is attending classes at San Diego City College and working toward a degree in nutrition. Next week, he has a job interview to work with a chef.


His career goal is to help diabetics and others through nutrition, maybe even working in a hospital.

“I want to give something back and help out, because I was helped.”

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