

Hospitals send homeless to new after-care program

By COURTNEY PERKES
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During a brief hospital stay, Philip Bushay slept in a bed for the first time in months. When doctors said he was well enough to recuperate from chest pains at home, Bushay had nowhere to go.

So rather than keep him longer, [St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton](#) sent Bushay to Orange County's first after-care program for homeless patients.

At the Costa Mesa Motor Inn, Bushay, 55, is convalescing with daily visits from a nurse, a mini fridge brimming with trays of meals, and the luxury of watching HBO from a queen-sized bed.

"This is absolute heaven for a guy like me," said Bushay, who works part-time as a fundraiser and does not have insurance. "The bed was made. They had all the toiletries laid out for me and fresh towels. I feel very fortunate."

In January, Irvine-based [Illumination Foundation](#) and the National Health Foundation launched the Recuperative Care Program. So far, 18 Orange County hospitals have signed up and delivered 55 patients to the motel by taxi or ambulance. The hospitals are then billed \$200 a day for stays of anywhere from five days to a couple of weeks.

About 10 percent of Orange County's estimated 21,479 homeless will require hospitalization, according to a report by the Hospital Association of Southern California and figures from the county. They typically suffer from high rates of physical and mental illness and are several times more likely to die than the general population.

Studies of similar programs elsewhere have found a reduction in hospital costs, fewer follow-up visits to the emergency room, and better health outcomes for patients who have a clean, safe place to rest, take medication or change bandages.

The National Health Foundation started a recuperative program in Los Angeles two years ago. Eugene Grigsby, the nonprofit's chief executive, said those in Southern California, unlike others elsewhere, are funded by hospitals rather than grants.

"We made a business case," Grigsby said. "On average, it costs \$2,000 a day to keep a homeless person in the hospital. On average, hospitals keep them about four extra days. That's an \$8,000 cost."

The programs come on the heels of high-profile cases involving the dumping of homeless patients.

Last April, College Hospital of Costa Mesa paid \$1.6 million to settle allegations of driving 150 psychiatric patients across the county line to Skid Row homeless shelters in downtown Los Angeles.

In 2007, the Los Angeles City Attorney's office reached an agreement with Kaiser Permanente after a 63-year-old woman was caught on tape being dropped off at rescue mission, wearing only a hospital gown. The HMO agreed to donate \$500,000 to charity, plus pay fines and legal fees.

"I would probably be dishonest if I say that didn't play any role in their willingness," Grigsby said. "Hospitals have struggled with what to do with these patients."

The medical ailments seen so far in Orange County vary and show the hazards of life on the streets. A couple men were severely beaten. One young woman didn't know she was pregnant until she went to the hospital with stomach pain. Another patient, who had been drinking, fell and suffered fractures.

Roughly 70 percent have no insurance.

"People that come to us are the worst of the worst," case manager Jocelyn Duarte said. "They have nothing. They have no one."

Recuperative care focuses on meeting more than physical needs. Case managers work to find patients housing or apply for identification or birth certificates so they can apply for Medi-Cal.

Lately, Bushay, a Cal State Long Beach graduate, has slept on a mat on the floor at the Fullerton Armory. He rides three buses to his Brea job, where he makes phone calls on behalf of a law enforcement charity. He became homeless in 2007 after losing a \$48,000-a-year job in San Diego and eventually his 401k, apartment and car.

Bushay's nurse is helping him tend to the oozing diabetic ulcer on his big toe, which forces him to walk with a cane. The foundation was working on finding a place for him to live before his release. He'd like to have a bicycle so he can more easily get to work.

"It is humiliating in the extreme," Bushay said. "You're like a stray dog. That's how you live."

Sister Claudette Des Forges, a St. Jude vice president, said hospital social workers have referred five homeless patients so far. She said they are given any needed medications and have access to physical therapy and other follow-up care.

The hospital calculates that in February, the recuperative care program saved St. Jude \$78,000.

"It's more than just the cost savings piece," Des Forges said. "It's the right thing to do. It's the ethical thing to do."

Anyone interested in donating a bike to Philip Bushay should call the Illumination Foundation at 949-273-0555.

Contact the writer: 714-796-3686 or cperkes@ocregister.com



Source: The Orange County Register, March 28, 2010
<http://www.ocregister.com/articles/hospital-241433-bushay-patients.html?pic=4>



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