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Interfaith House: Providing in-patient services to the homeless

By Kristen Strobbe

The worn and dog-eared pages of the Bible rest under Pete Pesina's equally worn left hand. It's his only copy.

"I owe a lot to God and now it's time for me to really understand him," Pesina said as he lifted the book off the table.

The soft-spoken 45-year-old is a self-admitted recovering crack cocaine addict, who, until early October, was in and out of jail on drug and domestic abuse charges. His drug addiction cost him his job and eventually forced him to live in his van.

But it was one night on Oct. 3, 2008, Pesina said, that changed his life and led him on a journey toward sobriety and restoration. He had gone on a drug run. Something went wrong. He ended up being stabbed, bleeding and nearly dead.

"I almost died that night," Pesina recalled. "But instead I'm here, slowly trying to figure out my life and my goals."

Pesina is just one of the 64 residents at Interfaith House, an organization on Chicago's West Side that offers in-patient medical needs to ill and injured homeless people. His story offers some commonalities with his fellow residents who are a diverse mix.

"Because we do work on the medical side of homelessness we see people who are college educated, had jobs, had homes and a family life," Sarah Schroeder, 27, director of development at Interfaith House, said.

The Loyola University graduate has been working at Interfaith House for three years, but has worked in the field of homeless services for the past 10. Working at Interfaith House, Schroeder said she has learned that ending up homeless while dealing with an illness or injury is easier than most people think.

"How many of us are seriously one illness away from losing our jobs and our stability?" Schroeder asked emphatically. "When you are in too much pain to work, there are very few options left for you."

Interfaith House opened in 1994 with the sole purpose of providing more options and services for homeless people to rehabilitate their bodies and their lives.

The people who come to Interfaith are first referred there by social workers from any of the 40 Chicago-area hospitals. Once the intake coordinator at Interfaith approves them, they are let in on a first-come, first-serve basis. Residents usually stay at Interfaith, which can accommodate 64 people, anywhere from three weeks to three months. Some, according to Schroeder, stay longer if they are dealing with a life-altering health issue such as HIV/AIDS and need to learn how to properly care for their illness.

There are three doctors on staff who work full-time Monday through Friday at the clinic. They treat the patients for whatever injury or illness they are suffering from, including trauma injuries such as work-related or motor vehicle accidents and chronic problems such as HIV/AIDS or chronic organ failure.

Because Interfaith House receives 49 percent of its annual funding from government sources, they are required to only take in residents who have been referred by other organizations such as Stroger and Mount Sinai Hospitals. These facilities have the resources to verify an individual's homeless status, officials said.

Schroeder said when she first started working in homeless services, she thought the referral system was detrimental, but now sees it as necessary.

“We’re dealing with tax-payer money,” Schroeder said. “Anyone can come to us and claim anything so it’s important that we are helping those who truly need it.”

The annual operating cost for Interfaith House is a little over \$2 million. With federal funding only covering about 49 percent of its annual budget, Interfaith relies on volunteers and corporate partnerships to help make up the other 50 percent.

Anna Lewis, the volunteer coordinator at Interfaith, keeps track of all the volunteers and also hunts for new ones. The 24-year-old started at Interfaith in August after taking part in City Year, a division of the AmeriCorps volunteer and community service network.

“I guess volunteering is where I belong,” Lewis said, who during her time with City Year worked at a nearby school on the West Side. She said she knew she wanted to start her career in the neighborhood. Then along came the job at the Interfaith House.

“I was really attracted to Interfaith because they are such a unique institution,” Lewis said. “No one else is providing this kind of care and I just wish we could be helping more people.”

Lewis tries to keep a steady flow of volunteers coming through the facility, but with limited volunteers and limited space, Interfaith House is limited in their growth, she said.

“For every person we do help, there’s another that we’re turning away,” Lewis added. “It can be disheartening, but we have to focus on the 64 people we’re treating right now.”

Pesina said he would like to see Interfaith House expand and operate different facilities around the city.

“I’m addict and people were always giving me the same pamphlets and same information about addiction,” Pesina said. “But I didn’t know where I needed to go or how to get there to receive treatment that the pamphlets were talking about.”

William Collins, 46, a recovering heroin addict, has been at Interfaith House since November after a traffic accident injured his femur. He now must deal with constant pain due to pinched nerves in his femur.

He too, thinks that there needs to be more places like Interfaith House, but he also said that ending the homeless cycle can start with the individual.

“I had a wife of 17 years, I was a successful barber, and then I made choices that ended up hurting me,” Collins said. “I realized that I couldn’t keep being so self-motivated, I had to start thinking of others in my life.”

Collins, a towering figure even as he walks with a severe limp and the aura of a gentle giant, said he owes Interfaith House for helping him come to terms with his injury and addiction, and hopes to accomplish his goal of finding independent housing before he leaves Interfaith.

Even as Collins and Pesina are on their way to recovery, both still must deal with their addictions and homelessness on a daily basis. Both are issues that can wear on the psyche of the residents, says Myra Austin, Interfaith’s case manager.

Source: <http://www.cityturnscold.com/2009/05/interfaith-house-providing-in-patient.html>
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Austin, 27, manages the cases of 20 residents, including Collins'. Her main service is to find housing for her clients. But her biggest challenge is helping them move past their frustration and anger.

"They [residents] get tired of trying," Austin said. "There are options out there for homeless people in terms of housing, but some options are so specific that not everyone is going to qualify."

Austin said there is special housing for homeless people living with HIV/AIDS or homeless people who have children, but there are those that don't want people with criminal backgrounds or addictions

"I understand why the residents get discouraged," Austin said. "But my job is to just keep reminding them that we're in this together and we will find something for them.

Pesina admits he is unsure of how he feels about where he is in life, even with the help Interfaith House is providing.

"I don't know," Pesina said. "I'm a work in progress.

"I just work on the everyday and see how I feel," he added. "But I know my life has to change."

Pesina said he intends to continue with morning prayer service at Interfaith House, to continue talking about his life with other residents and maybe even to contact his two grown daughters whom he suspects are eager to see their father again.