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Daily Pilot

Lighting the darkest path

Irvine-based Illumination Foundation works with homeless who are recovering from cancer, surgeries or other medical treatments, giving them shelter and chance for survival.

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This is the third in an occasional series about homelessness in Costa Mesa.

COSTA MESA — A three-tiered fountain covered with blue tiles and topped with a pair of dolphins greets visitors at the entrance to the Costa Mesa Motor Inn.

Doors to the motel's rooms are shut. Many of the rooms are dark and quiet. In others, blaring televisions interrupt the silence.

Behind some of these doors are patients recently discharged from Orange County hospitals. They are deemed well enough to go home, but have no homes to go to.

Through the Irvine-based Illumination Foundation, homeless who are in recovery after major surgeries, comas, cancer and other emergencies requiring hospitalization are placed in O.C. motels like the Motor Inn until it's time to move on.

At times the efforts of the foundation, known as the IF, have been at odds with the city's goals for improving and gentrifying declining pockets of Harbor Boulevard. Costa Mesa offers an array of its own social services through various nonprofits, but city officials have long tried to distance the community from its image as a homeless magnet.

Members of the City Council have said they want to first see that their own residents are taken care of when they fall on hard times, but Costa Mesa should not have to take on cases from other cities.

"I'm supportive of doing our share, but I think it should be our share," Mayor Pro Tem Jim Righeimer said. "We have our fair share here, and we're doing what we can to help residents and people in Costa Mesa with a connection to the city. I would not be supportive of us doing homeless housing for the rest of the county."

But those in the trenches see homelessness through a countywide lens that doesn't single out cities.

"We understand they [the city] feel that helping the homeless in Costa Mesa would only attract more homeless to the city," said Paul Leon, who founded the IF program while working as a nurse. "This has been a fundamental disagreement. The Illumination Foundation is a regional program. Unfortunately, homelessness is also [a] regional issue. The homeless are struggling to survive. Most are not paying attention to city lines."

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'My path crossed with Paul Leon'

Illumination started in March 2008 when a co-worker of Leon asked him to track down a homeless man who, after being discharged from the hospital with a catheter, wandered the streets.

Leon found the ruddy-faced man with sand-colored hair at the Armory Emergency Shelter in Santa Ana, catheter and all.

In the armory, Leon looked around and saw about 200 other homeless men, women and children living without proper medical attention. He felt compelled to act.

Initially, Leon hoped to work with 50 to 60 families. Now, three years later, the IF has worked with 330 families and has 50 employees. Leon is its president and chief executive officer.

The program provides social work, behavioral health services and long-term housing. It also works with recuperative clients recently discharged from the hospital, providing them with medical oversight and temporary housing.

"We actually started by just being the safety net," Leon said, noting that services for the estimated 20,000 to 30,000 homeless in Orange County were "very few and scattered."

The IF has contracts with all 21 county hospitals and has worked with about 1,000 recuperating homeless fresh out of the hospital.

Patients discharged with nowhere to recover but the streets are given a free place to stay, with funding help from the hospital from which they came; it's enough to pay for seven to 30 days at one of the IF's partnering motels.

Hoag Hospital, for example, gave the IF \$17,500 in 2008 to provide care for discharged homeless people, said Andrea Wood, a senior marketing consultant.

Of the 1,000 recuperative clients the organization has worked with, 70% have made it into permanent housing, according to Leon.

The foundation does not reject people who relapse into substance abuse because, according to Leon, that perpetuates the cycle of homelessness. Instead, the group uses a "harm-reduction program."

"If you do relapse, we will work with you," Leon said.

For the homeless, the average life expectancy is 52 — well shy of the nationwide life expectancy of 75 for men and 80 for women. A study performed by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council found that homeless are three to four times more likely to die prematurely than the general population.

When someone is placed in the IF's recuperative care program, it is often at the end of their life, Leon said.

Darrell Patrick Eitel, 52, is one of those people.

Recently diagnosed with Stage 4 colorectal cancer that spread to his liver, Eitel was told by doctors that he had a 50% chance of survival.

The best Eitel could hope for was living with a colostomy bag for the rest of his life after the cancer "obliterated" his rectum. At worst, he could die within two years.

Eitel was on the streets less than a month before he went to the hospital. Since his July 1 diagnosis, he's had two rounds of chemotherapy, which leave him debilitated for days.

"If I didn't have this, I'd never survive on the street," Eitel said.

Pietryz Foster, 47, made it through the program. After being laid off from her job of 12 years, the seven-year Marine Corps veteran found herself in Torrance without a home. She later lived out of her car, wandering from Venice Beach and Santa Monica before going to the Isaiah House in Santa Ana.

"It causes you to spiral; it takes your whole world out of the norm," Foster said.

Out of desperation, Foster's 21-year-old daughter, Gina West, who was pregnant at the time, left Seattle in search of her homeless mother, but wound up on the streets.

Leon met Foster at Isaiah House and told her to meet him at the Motor Inn.

"He told me to just go to the front office and get [my] room key," Foster said before crying. "I consider myself lucky that my path crossed with Paul Leon."

About three years later, Foster, West and 3-year-old grandson Darian share a two-bedroom apartment near Orange Coast College.

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'We can't help the whole world'

The IF uses 23 of the 232 rooms at the Motor Inn at 2277 Harbor Blvd. The foundation also works out of several other sites, including three in Anaheim, one in Santa Ana, and some across North County. Nurses and social workers routinely visit the rooms where families and patients in the recuperative care program stay.

The Motor Inn, known for its occasional trouble, is one of seven Harbor Boulevard motels on the Costa Mesa Police Department's radar.

Motels along Harbor have been known sites for domestic violence, drug activity, housing registered sex offenders and, at one point in 1993, one was even considered a satellite jail for low-level offenders.

Compared with people who create trouble at the motel, IF recuperative clients and client families draw little attention, said Motor Inn general manager Hector Almaraz.

"I take them pretty much the same. They're just a guest," Almaraz said. "I've never said, 'Oh, those Illumination people.'"

While the foundation's presence at the motel has drawn more attention from the city than other local charitable organizations, Almaraz said, asking residents to turn down the TV — a routine issue — is the biggest problem among those staying there through the IF.

Costa Mesa, meanwhile, is continuing to identify its chronic homeless population and focus on it, which has been the "driving force of homeless prevention," according to Muriel Ullman, the city's neighborhood improvement manager who is involved with the Homeless Task Force.

"The hope is that every city will do its share," Ullman said. "We're trying to identify our population and help them first. We want to make sure we don't act as a magnet and that we work with our population ..."

Leon doesn't believe that the IF's efforts funnel homeless people into Costa Mesa. He sees the nonprofit's work as helping families and recuperative clients make the transition toward a new life.

Councilwoman Wendy Leece, who is on the task force, said its founding principle is to focus on dealing with homeless Costa Mesans before assisting others.

"We can't help the whole world," she said. "We can't bring people in from other cities. I would be very concerned if their focus isn't on helping Costa Mesa homeless persons in Costa Mesa.

"It's time to draw the line with other service providers. First, we've got to help our own."