

Rescue Mission offers post-hospital help

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The [San Diego](#) Rescue Mission has established a Recuperative Care Unit to help homeless people complete their recovery from hospital stays without living on the street.

By the time Lorri Leard got to the San Diego Rescue Mission to recuperate from abdominal surgery three weeks ago, she had been in and out of the hospital three times.

The first trip was for a ruptured appendix and the next two were to treat complications that are all too predictable when a homeless patient is returned to the chaos of the street and occasional nights on a friend's couch.

Since June 2009, the rescue mission in downtown San Diego has offered another recovery option — a 28-bed Recuperative Care Unit for chronically homeless people to stay after being discharged from the hospital.

It is the only program of its kind in San Diego County.

"I couldn't imagine leaving the hospital and going out on the street with this," Leard said last week, as she lifted her shirt to show a massive bandage covering an intestinal abscess that continues to drain. "So, I'm grateful for this place."

The nonprofit, Christian-based rescue mission has provided a variety of social services to the poor and homeless over its 55-year history. The recuperation unit is one of its newest programs.

Leard is typical of the 144 people who have stayed in the unit since it opened, said director Tavis Walker. The patients all have been homeless for years and been regulars at hospital emergency rooms, most often being treated for infections, broken bones from accidents or assaults, head injuries or diabetes-related problems.

"A lot of their illnesses and injuries have to do with the hazards of living on the street," Walker said.

When they arrive at the unit, patients know they will be getting more than a soft bed, home-cooked meals, a television and follow-up medical care through the hospital.

The rescue mission provides patients with psychiatric care, substance abuse counseling, and help in getting off the street.

Case workers help patients apply for programs such as Medi-Cal, County Medical Services care for uninsured indigent adults or state disability. They connect patients with community clinics for future medical care and look for transitional housing or other living arrangements.

“This is one of those times when people can slow down and reflect on their lives,” Walker said. “This is an opportunity for a turning point and we help them do that.”

The direct costs to run the unit amount to about \$300,000 a year and about half is covered by grants and fees paid by participating hospitals, rescue mission chief executive Herb Johnson said.

The United Way has provided the largest grant. Hospitals pay \$80 to \$100 per day for up to 30 days for each patient they send, as well as providing a 30-day supply of medication, follow-up care and home health aides if necessary.

UCSD Medical Center, Scripps Mercy Hospital, Scripps Chula Vista Medical Center and Sharp Memorial Hospital are the major participants, Walker said.

Local clinics and social service agencies refer some patients.

The arrangement benefits the patient and the hospital, said Annemarie Degen-DeCort, associate director of care coordination at UCSD Medical Center.

Patients get follow-up medical care while also getting help aimed at ending their homelessness.

Hospitals no longer keep patients for longer periods because they have nowhere to go, while covering the cost out of a charity fund.

“This definitely stops that revolving door in the emergency room because we maintain a connection with them,” Degen-DeCort said, “and it gives us the ability to open up a bed for the next patient.”

Rose Turner, a case manager with the Scripps Health hospital system, said Scripps has saved 1,121 inpatient days that would have cost \$785,000 since the start of the program. Instead, Scripps spent \$140,000 on per-day fees for patients at the rescue mission.

“Our goal is for them to improve their quality of life and not constantly be in our emergency room,” Turner said.

Cathy Baker, 50, shares a room with Leard. The two discovered they had known each other as teens at Helix High School in La Mesa.

Baker said she worked as a truck driver until 2005, when her boyfriend died of hepatitis C and her world fell apart. She eventually ended up living on a hillside in Ocean Beach.

She spent months in the unit last year, after being treated at Scripps Mercy for spinal abscesses she said were brought on by intravenous drug use.

In April, she returned after being diagnosed with degenerating spinal discs requiring surgery. Now, she said, she is committed to the therapy the unit offers.

“I love this place because when I feel crushed, they give me alternatives,” she said. “My therapist is helping me come to terms with what’s happened in the past and put my life back together.”

Baker has added a few personal touches to the room. On one counter, she has assembled a shell collection, some makeup and a bottle of perfume. A powder blue satin bedspread shimmers on her bed.

“Now I can have some things,” she said proudly. “You can’t have anything when you don’t have a place to live.”

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