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Providing homeless with a place to recover

by Gary Hopkins

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MID-CITY — At night, following her breast cancer surgery, Patricia Parker would lie awake in her battered, 40-year-old pickup truck parked curbside on a Santa Monica street, wishing she was anywhere else.

The skin on her back and breast was burned raw from the radiation therapy she was undergoing to keep her cancer at bay. The depression that had sent her into a tailspin ever since the death of her 23-year-old daughter from uterine cancer 16 years before overwhelmed her. It didn't help that Parker's boyfriend of 17 years walked out on her three days after she was diagnosed with cancer, taking everything she owned. At 56, she had no money, no home, no companionship and no hope.

"I was beside myself," Parker said with tears in her eyes. "I was ready to give up. I was telling everyone goodbye."

Parker's lifeline was the offer of a bed in the respite care program operated by OPCC and the Venice Family Clinic, in collaboration with Saint John's Health Center. The program — the only such service within a 20-mile radius — provides food, shelter, supportive services and medical care at OPCC's shelter in Santa Monica for homeless people who need a clean, warm place in which to recover after being treated in an emergency room or in a hospital.

"If it wasn't for that bed, I couldn't even tell you where I'd be today," said Parker, who has been in the respite care program since January and is now working with an OPCC housing coordinator to find a permanent roof over her head.

"The greatest thing about this program is that it puts you back on the right track," Parker said. "It gives you hope. It's given a lot of people hope."

The respite care program was launched almost two years ago to meet the medical and housing needs of the homeless population on the Westside, said Mary Luthy, director of community benefits at Saint John's. "We were seeing large numbers of homeless people coming through our emergency room, many of them older and sicker than in previous years," she said. "When homeless people are discharged from the hospital, they often go back to the street. It's not healthy for them and it's frustrating for us because they frequently end up back in the ER."

Providing stable housing for homeless people as they recover from injury or illness is critical to their long-term health and helps preserve precious healthcare resources, said Deborah Maddis, director of Housing and Special Initiatives for OPCC.

"The respite care program makes it much easier for homeless individuals to get the medical services they need," Maddis said. "It also reduces overuse of the ER by breaking the cycle so they're not going back and forth between the street and the ER."

To house the pilot program, OPCC, the largest provider of homeless services on the Westside, redesigned some space within its 70-bed shelter to create 10 semi-private respite care beds — five for men, five for women. Residents are allowed to stay at the center 24 hours a day for up to three weeks, although they are granted extensions if a doctor determines they need more time to heal. Medical care is provided next door at OPCC's Access Center in two exam rooms staffed by doctors from the Venice Family Clinic. Saint John's offers diagnostic and other medical services at no charge for patients in the program who have already been deemed eligible for charity.

To date, a total of 145 homeless patients have used the respite care program. Eighty of them were either inpatients at Saint John's or outpatients treated in the hospital's ER at one time or another. Initial results indicate the program will have significant long-term benefits. OPCC has been able to place 42 percent of the respite care patients in either temporary or permanent housing. And those returning to Saint John's for treatment after being in the program have generally been less sick and required a shorter length of stay in the hospital.

"The respite care program has made a difference in the lives of these people because they are less ill," Luthy said. "They are receiving better care in the outpatient setting, and they do not become as acutely ill and do not require hospitalization."

Participating agencies said the program demonstrates the effectiveness of collaboration.

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