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Homeless deserve health care during recovery, too

By Robertson Nash

Tennessee Voices

Health care is on the mind of everyone today, including the homeless. So it is with great interest that I read Christina Sanchez's article, "Health Care Barriers Overwhelm Nashville Homeless" in Tuesday's *Tennessean* (Aug. 18). I agreed with all the comments made in the story, especially that "housing is health care" and that you cannot have one without the other. I would like to add one kind of housing that was not mentioned, commonly known as respite care.

Since last year, I have been working at Room In The Inn's Campus for Human Development providing recuperative care in our Guest House respite care space.

Imagine the challenges posed by accidents and disease. Broken arms. Extensive burns. Infected diabetic ulcers. Depression. Hypertension. Pneumonia. HIV/AIDS. Imagine recovering from any of these challenges after hospitalization. Now try to imagine recovering without the gifts of home, a familiar bed, medical providers you know and trust, easy access to medication, a bountiful diet and the care and support of family and friends. That is reality for hundreds of homeless every year.

In the past year, our program has provided respite care for 222 homeless men and women seeking safe recuperation after hospital discharge. Additionally, I regularly encounter walk-up patients who are discharged from hospitals with medicine and supplies and yet end up at our doorstep with filthy bandages, no dressing change supplies, and no antibiotics or pain medicine. These people are at critically high risk for post-surgical infections, return visits to ERs and even amputation without help.

Other services we provide are less dramatic but still critical components of the holistic vision we have of respite care. Once a person is received, we also link people to resources including housing, Social Security disability income, state ID cards, birth certificates, job opportunities, daily AA meetings, and other educational classes and activities. Our current expansion project is designed to help us provide higher levels of care for more homeless.

The preventative benefits to our health-care system are many: re-hospitalization rates, number of days spent in the hospital and emergency room visits are reduced, saving thousands of health-care dollars.

The tragedy of homelessness in Nashville is overwhelming. Respite care is one link in a citywide chain of services that we must all support for the sake of the poorest and sickest who suffer in our midst.
