

APPEAL-DEMOCRAT

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Health care on the streets

Hospital offers primary care to the homeless so they aren't forced to use the emergency room

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Hospitals all over the state are seeing a surge in homeless patients, and Adventist Health/Rideout is no different, except, they've decided to hit the streets and take action.

From wounded feet that won't heal to untreated diabetes and poor nutrition, living in harsh conditions exacerbates health issues already faced by homeless individuals. In January, Adventist Health/Rideout in Marysville launched a Street Nursing Program aimed at connecting area homeless with health care. Adventist Health contributed \$75,000 to start the program, and the project recently received a \$100,000 grant for a mobile clinic.

"We knew we were seeing an increased number of homeless patients crossing the threshold," Adventist Director of Case Management Teri Howard said Thursday. "Our ER was really being used as a primary care office for the homeless."

Howard said many of the homeless individuals they have encountered have some sort of medical plan, but didn't know where to go to find a doctor. The Street Nursing Program helps close some of those barriers that the homeless population face in seeking health care.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, street nurses set up at the Life Building Center in Marysville and Hands of Hope in Yuba City to meet with patients. They are limited in what they can do medically, but check patients' vital signs, listen to their lungs and heart, and check their wounds. But they're doing more than bandaging up scrapes: they also act as social workers, connecting patients with physicians and case managers, providing medication boxes and locks, and finding transportation. Perhaps the most important component is the education – teaching patients about why it's important to take their medication and follow up with a doctor.

"These are patients who go to the ER three times a day," Registered Nurse Cindy Cooper said Thursday. "We're changing the path for them. They feel listened to."

If a patient's condition requires emergency care, the street nurses call for an ambulance and speak with physicians in the ER so they are aware of the issue when the patient arrives. Per SB 1152 – which went into effect in January – patients in need are sent home with food, are clothed, and are connected with resources like the Yuba-Sutter Food Bank, Howard said.

Since kicking off in mid-January, the Street Nursing Program has helped 150 patients. They saved one man's eye, which was badly infected, and they likely saved the life of a pregnant woman who had not been treating her diabetes. She was connected to temporary housing and her partner recently found a job. Another diabetic woman, who loved to cook, recently earned the certifications needed to apply for cooking jobs, and she's managing her disease better. The nurses earned the trust of a man with severe PTSD, who finally agreed to an appointment with Veterans Affairs.

"We're changing behaviors to help who we can move off of the streets," Howard said.

Many of those 150 patients have been in to see the street nurses multiple times – opening up about their conditions and being more receptive to help.

Patient Care Coordinator Ashten Phillips, Registered Nurse Leslie O'Neill, and Cooper are three of the street nurses who have forged relationships with members of the local homeless population. They said they have already seen the program make a huge difference.

“There’s so many rocks on top of them, they don’t know how to reach up and pull off the top rock,” Phillips said Thursday. “They need somebody.”

The \$100,000 grant for a mobile clinic will go toward outfitting a medical van for the street nurses to take out to meet the homeless population where they are, whether that be near Whiteaker Hall or at the river bottoms, and hope to have it ready by December. Personnel are also eyeing the possibility of setting up a clean needle exchange and hope to take the street nursing program to the FEMA trailers at the Yuba-Sutter Fairgrounds for Camp Fire evacuees.

“I think we’re definitely changing people’s lives,” Cooper said.

More homeless seek medical care statewide

Homeless patients made about 100,000 visits to California hospitals in 2017 – a 28 percent rise from 2015, according to California Healthline. Officials attribute the trend to the growing number of homeless individuals in recent years. From 2015 to 2017, the state’s homeless population grew by about 16 percent.

Teri Howard, director of Case Management for Adventist, said the three biggest areas of need in the community are housing, medical care and food insecurity.

Besides mental illness, a disproportionate number of homeless were hospitalized for treatment of HIV infections, alcohol and drug addictions, skin disorders, burns, drug overdoses and traumatic injuries, according to California Healthline. Living in deep poverty can lead to health problems, and many homeless people are driven to the streets by health issues, particularly mental illness and drug addiction.

According to California Healthline:

- In Sutter County, there were 117 hospital discharges where the patient was homeless in 2017, out of 1,162 total discharges (making up 10.1 percent of all hospital discharges).
- In Yuba County, there were 250 homeless discharges where the patient was homeless in 2017, out of 12,668 total discharges (making up 2 percent of all hospital discharges).

*Some patients may be admitted and discharged more than once in a single year.