Three St. Paul hospitals join forces to improve care for the homeless

March 3, 2017

Three St. Paul hospitals have teamed up to improve the medical care for Minnesota’s homeless.

The hospitals, along with Catholic Charities, are expected to announce Friday their collaboration for a 16-bed medical respite unit, included in the new Higher Ground St. Paul complex. The program gives homeless men and women recently treated and released from area hospitals a place to recover.

“Things that seem simple — like getting plenty of rest, drinking plenty of fluids — are nearly impossible to achieve if you are homeless,” said Diana Vance-Bryan, senior vice president of Health Services and chief administrative officer of Catholic Charities. Often missing, she adds, is a support system to help the patient.

The respite unit at Higher Ground has nurses on staff, along with mental health and community health professionals. The patients also get support from housing advocates. And expansion plans for the entire Dorothy Day Place complex will include a medical clinic on site.

The hospitals — United Hospital (Allina Health), Regions Hospital (HealthPartners), and St. Joseph’s Hospital (HealthEast) — are helping design and fund the respite unit, along with support from the Medica Foundation and Blue Plus.

“Many individuals experiencing homelessness end up on the streets after receiving major medical or psychiatric care, with nowhere to safely recover and heal,” said Kathryn Correia, president and chief executive officer of HealthEast. “The medical respite unit will offer a safe, peaceful, healing environment
and ensure we are not discharging patients to the street.”

**HIGHER GROUND’S PROMISING BEGINNING**

The January opening of Higher Ground was years in the making to replace the overcrowded Dorothy Day Center homeless shelter. Rather than a mat on the floor, the new effort aims to provide people with a path toward independent living as they graduate from bunk beds to small apartments.

Higher Ground stands five stories tall and sits on the edge of downtown. There are 280 free and pay-for-stay bunks as well as 193 small, one-room apartments. Each of the building’s five stories offers an increased level of privacy and independence along with communal areas. Residents also have access to meals, laundry and support services.

The medical respite unit is located on the second floor.

Catholic Charities is still seeking funding to complete a second phase to Higher Ground, which will include an opportunity center designed to help people find jobs, financial services and veteran programs. It will also house the medical clinic and additional housing. The entire complex, to be called Dorothy Day Place, will cost about $100 million.

The old Dorothy Day Center building will be demolished to make way for the second phase. Catholic Charities hopes to complete construction in late 2018, though that timeframe will depend on funding.

**PROMISE OF RESPITE CARE**

“Our vision for the Dorothy Day Center is simple: by working together, we can better help those in need,” said Mary Brainerd, president and chief executive officer of HealthPartners.

One out of every four people who relied on the Dorothy Day Center were elderly and disabled with complex medical conditions, according to Catholic Charities spokeswoman Therese Gales. Managing medical conditions — such as diabetes and cancer — can be tough enough for those with homes; the conditions often spiral out of control for people experiencing homelessness.

The Higher Ground respite unit is based on a program Catholic Charities piloted with North Memorial Health Care in 2012. Comparing the year before and the year after a respite program at Exodus Residence in Minneapolis began, officials found a 67 percent reduction in re-hospitalization and a more than 50 percent reduction in emergency room visits.

“This collaboration will make lives better for some of our most vulnerable neighbors … lessening the need to return to the hospital with additional health complications,” said Dr. Penny Wheeler, president and chief executive officer of Allina Health. “It is an investment that will save lives.”

Work on the Higher Ground respite program began in earnest two years ago with staff from the hospitals lending their expertise. They helped design the program and the standardized processes on everything from referrals and transitions to data collection and care, according Gales. Up to 80 percent of the first year’s operating funds have been pledged by the hospitals and several hospital employees are now volunteering at Higher Ground.

“This partnership of three major hospitals and also other key partners, represents the best in our community,” Brainerd said.