As some of the most vulnerable members of the community, patients experiencing homelessness are at risk of poorer health outcomes and often lack access to basic support in recovering from illness or injury.

Cottage Health, a not-for-profit system serving Santa Barbara, Ventura and San Luis Obispo counties, in partnership with PATH Santa Barbara, is seeking to address basic needs of these fragile patients through the Cottage Recuperative Care Program. Launched as a pilot program with four beds in fall 2018 and fully implemented with 10 beds at the beginning of 2019, the program helps homeless individuals recover in a safe and supportive environment after hospital discharge. Goals include increased access to permanent housing, decreased hospital visits, and increased access to a medical home.

Under the program, PATH provides up to 10 beds for patients discharged from Cottage Health hospitals in Santa Barbara, Goleta Valley and the Santa Ynez Valley. Patients can stay up to 90 days in the program and receive support from an onsite Cottage Health nurse, a Cottage Health navigator to help address social needs, and around-the-clock respite care monitors.

Currently, Santa Barbara County has approximately 1,800 individuals experiencing homelessness, of whom 50% live in the City of Santa Barbara. Much of this population comes through the emergency department (ED) frequently, only to return to the streets facing challenging circumstances for recuperation. Working with PATH, the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department and CenCal Health (the region’s Medi-Cal program), Cottage Health has a steering committee with these partners to focus on program planning, process improvement, and evaluation.

The program brings hope and help to a population most in need. Patients are provided a safe place to recover

FAST FACTS

NATIONAL
552,830 individuals experienced homelessness in the US in 2018
• 17 out of every 100,000 people
• 67% were individuals
• 33% were families

CALIFORNIA
129,972 individuals experienced homelessness in California in 2018
• 6,702 were family households
• 10,836 were veterans
• 12,396 were unaccompanied young adults (18-24)
• 34,332 were individuals

Source: US Interagency Council on Homelessness
and receive support in achieving better health outcomes and addressing their social needs. To support them, the onsite Cottage Health navigator and nurse develop individualized social needs and medical needs care plans, connect patients to resources, and help them become document-ready for housing.

“We are seeing patients move from the streets to the hospital and then to the Recuperative Care Program and, ultimately, long-term housing,” said Katy Bazylewicz, Cottage Health Vice President for Marketing and Health Population. “Having a safe place to recover, access to medical services, and support to address basic needs, provides an environment where patients become document-ready for housing and utilize fewer crisis services. Patients are also accomplishing a range of personal goals, such as progressing from a wheelchair to a walker, healing foot wounds that prevent amputation, and successfully gaining employment.”

To date, the program has had 23 patients (83% male and 100% CenCal), with significant decreases in ED and inpatient visits. Currently, there are nine patients in the program, and 10 patients have completed it. Upon exiting, one entered permanent housing, one moved to temporary housing, seven transitioned to PATH program beds, and one returned to a prior living arrangement.

“This program offers a long-term solution to homelessness, where we’re bringing to bear a whole variety of services,” said Chuck Flacks, PATH’s Director of Programs. “When homeless patients see the opportunities and the real hope that we’re providing, it can be life-changing.”

Cottage Health will continue to address the needs of these highly vulnerable patients by working to improve their health outcomes and access to permanent housing. In addition to local partnerships, Cottage has also become a member of the National Healthcare for the Homeless Council Learning Collaborative, which is seeking to improve evaluation of recuperative care programs across the nation. Through these local and national collaborations, Santa Barbara County patients are receiving support and care that extend beyond the walls of the hospital and address what for many is the root cause of poor health: homelessness.

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