

Hundreds of Calls Reflect Need For Homeless Healthcare Solution

by Adam Walser of WHAS11.com

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Louisville, KY (WHAS11) - The issue of homelessness costs Louisville millions of dollars each year.

A study conducted in 2006 estimated those annual costs at \$44 Million, with nearly a third of that total related to providing health care. This can often lead to a strain on emergency services, like police, fire and EMS.

At Wayside Christian Mission, the city's largest homeless facility, calls for help come often, despite the existence of programs meant to alleviate burdens on the emergency response system. Calls for police, fire and EMS come from Wayside nearly every day.

In fact, during the past two years, an average of nearly 16 calls a month have come from Wayside's main facility at 432 East Jefferson Street. Metrosafe indicates there were 1,644 calls in all from Jan 2009- Jan 2011.

Some are for serious issues, like a woman going into labor, or people suffering potentially life-threatening medical conditions.

Wayside's Chief Operating Officer Nina Moseley says the calls are necessary because of who they deal with everyday. "A lot of our folks are medically fragile," Moseley said. "And sometimes we do have to seek additional care, additional emergency care for them."

And despite the fact that multiple calls are made from Wayside each day, audio tapes reveal some staff appear unprepared for emergencies. "I work security," said one caller, but he couldn't identify the phone number for the facility.

"There's no extension upstairs and I can't leave the desk," said another caller. "I'm just the man that makes the calls."

"The staff at shelters are not medically trained, per se. We can recognize when someone needs to be at the clinic," said Moseley.

"They've resorted to calling us, because they don't know who else to call," said Mindy Glenn, of Metrosafe. "They don't know what else to do and it's an emergency to them."

Many times, the callers are taken to University of Louisville Hospital's Emergency Room. They have to treat everyone, because they are reimbursed for indigent care with millions of your tax dollars.

The average cost of an emergency room visit is now more than a thousand dollars. It goes up to \$1,500 for patients over the age of 45. The ambulance ride costs around \$500.

Wayside is located only about one mile from the hospital.

“They don't have a doctor and the only thing they know about is the hospital and they end up going there when that really isn't the right place for them to go,” said Natalie Harris, Executive Director of the Coalition for the Homeless.

“You can save almost \$17,000 over a two-year period by keeping people in housing, versus the cost of emergency rooms,” Harris added.

More than 1,000 police calls over the past two years to Wayside means officers are tied up for hundreds of hours which they could spend doing other police work.

Marsha Smith is a nurse with the Phoenix Health Center, one of the few alternatives for the homeless. “It's a vicious cycle, really. It's a vicious cycle that just goes round and round,” said Smith.

Phoenix Health Center provides check-ups and free medicine for people like Thomas Cruitt.

“It's rough out there. There's a lot of stress. A lot of anxiety,” said Cruitt.

Cruitt is one of thousands of homeless people served each year by Wayside and the Phoenix Health Center, which is a private non-profit organization funded partially with federal grants.

“They tend to have both medical and psychological issues, along with chemical dependency. So those folks are really at risk,” said Eric Long, the Phoenix Health Center's Hospital Liason.

Even though medical care at the clinic costs a mere fraction of what it does in an emergency room setting, the clinic can't keep up. “There's a huge demand and it can be tough to get in,” said Smith. “There's just not enough to go around for everybody that needs our services.”

Until a better solution can be found, though, it looks like the frequent calls from and emergency runs to Wayside will continue.

And you're paying for them.

“We, of course, can spend those dollars in a lot better ways,” said Harris, who believes that more low cost and transitional housing is the right solution for this complicated problem.

Wayside's Nina Moseley reminds us that at no time in the past 25 years has University Hospital or Metro Emergency Medical Services expressed concerns about Wayside overusing ambulance or emergency room services.

Moseley points out that on many occasions hospitals have "dumped" patients at Wayside and other shelters, sometimes even bringing them in ambulance, in order to save them those hospitals the costs of providing extended treatment.