



Center to offer respite from streets

By Seth Hemmelgarn
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A new facility has opened in San Francisco to offer homeless people struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues a break from the streets and referrals to services.



Hummingbird Place, which is being run by the nonprofit Positive Resource Center, recently opened with four beds and will expand to 15 by December. People may stay for up to two weeks and get counseling, referrals to medical care, showers, and other services.

"As one of the only respite centers of its kind in the nation, Hummingbird Place is designed to help people who are not sick enough for the hospital, but they're too ill to live on the streets or stay in a homeless shelter," Brett Andrews, PRC's CEO, said in an August 30 news release announcing the center's opening.

"The programs at Hummingbird Place will focus on those that are leaving psychiatric emergency care and also coming from the city's various homeless services," stated San Francisco Health Director Barbara Garcia. "The program's focus will be on helping homeless people that have had multiple visits to hospitals due to psychiatric and addiction crisis."

People who are marginally housed are also eligible, officials said.

In an interview, Andrews, a gay man who's led PRC for many years, said, "Hummingbird is for exactly the individual that we run into on a daily basis" in places like Muni and BART transit stations "who are in the streets, who are dealing with and suffering with mental health substance abuse issues that in many ways haven't been diagnosed."

The center will "lessen the burden on our acute services and the most expensive services by bringing in folks who are really too unwell and too sick to be on the street," but who aren't necessarily in need of "that high level of services" the city provides, he said.

Staying at Hummingbird provides "a safe, comfortable environment" where people are "able to make more informed and better choices," said Andrews, who pointed out people may still "want to go back to the street" when their time there is up.

After people leave the center, there will be opportunities to do "continued follow-up with them to make sure they had the right referrals," with the hope that they "ultimately land in a stable, safe environment," he said.

Even though people will only be at the center for a short time, "you can still have a significant impact," he said. Hummingbird started as a pilot project and it retains that status, but the goal is to expand the model. Andrews noted that Mayor Ed Lee has included millions of dollars in the city's 2017-19 budget for Hummingbird and other Navigation Centers. Unlike traditional homeless shelters, the centers allow people to bring their belongings and pets and stay with their partners, among other benefits.

"The great opportunity here is for us to prove that it works with the longer term goal of expanding this model throughout the community," said Andrews.

Lee stated, "We are helping our most vulnerable residents break out of the cycle of streets and hospitalization. ... We are committed to addressing the root causes of homelessness, and providing treatments for behavioral health and substance use will help us reach that goal."

PRC has a one-year, \$1.5 million contract to oversee the project. Andrews said the funding is for clinical staff, peer counselors, food, "and all the other supplies needed in order to run a 24-hour facility."

Hummingbird is located in the city's Behavioral Health Center next to the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital campus.

PRC is a longtime provider of benefits counseling and employment services to people who are living with or at risk for HIV/AIDS. Last year, the agency merged with AIDS Emergency Fund, which offers financial assistance to people disabled by HIV/AIDS, and Baker Places, which provides residential substance abuse treatment and other services. The combined agency is still known as Positive Resource Center.

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