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Grant helps Alameda County fight homelessness and better serve the chronically ill



Denise Lopez, outreach provider HIV Education and Prevention Project of Alameda County (HEPPAC), right, gives out supplies to a man who wished to remain anonymous at a homeless encampment in Oakland, Calif., on Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2016. A new \$140 million grant awarded to the county will be used for outreach and case management for the chronically ill and homeless. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

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PUBLISHED: November 4, 2016 at 4:42 pm | UPDATED: November 4, 2016 at 7:09 pm

A 30-year-old homeless woman who had been stabbed in the throat five years earlier still had a tracheotomy tube in her neck. She had already made repeated trips to the emergency room for a recurring treatable infection when a street outreach team came upon her gasping for breath in an Oakland encampment and rushed her to the hospital.

In the new world envisioned by Alameda County Health Care officials, on her very first visit to the ER, the woman would be set up with an advocate who would link her to mental health counseling and other social services. This point person would introduce her to people who could help her find housing so she wouldn't be discharged back to the street.

Alameda County is working to make this dream a reality through an innovative state-funded program called the Whole Person Care Pilot. The Alameda County Health Care Agency was recently awarded a \$140 million grant over five years to help achieve better health outcomes for a particular population of high users of Medi-Cal health services whose needs often cross the boundaries of different health and social service agencies.

The idea is to create a more holistic approach to treating patients by creating a data-sharing system between the various fragmented county health agencies and service providers. If things go according to plan, the Medi-Cal costs resulting from avoidable repeat emergency room visits and hospitalizations would go way down and people would be healthier.

“We're really saying we need to bring together all of the different systems so that we treat the whole person and not just, ‘I'll treat the head, and you treat the body,’ ” said Suzanne Warner, deputy director for the county's health care for the homeless program.

The grant isn't just focused on homeless people. It also targets other high users of expensive medical services such as those who cycle in and out of emergency rooms, complaining of panic attacks or frequent admits to the John George Psychiatric Pavilion. The county must match the \$140 million in state funds.

Warner said the grant gives the county a unique opportunity to reach out to some estimated 10,000 people living on the street.

“There's a recognition now that housing and health care are intertwined,” Warner said. “We can do a lot with this money to help people get into housing and retain it.”

She said the agency would use part of the grant to increase street outreach and provide intensive case management to homeless people to help them transition into a stable living situation. The agency will also set up subsidies for landlords who rent to homeless clients. It would also pay for a legal clinic and housing education program.

Vivian Wan, chief operating officer at Abode Services, said the grant would help her organization offer far more intensive services.

“We have an outreach team that serves 400 to 700 (people) but right now it’s just a light touch, hey come in and get a granola bar because we don’t have enough boots on the ground,” Wan said. “This will make sure that the most vulnerable people get identified and supported right now.”

Nancy Halloran, project director for the county health care agency, said that once the new data sharing system is up and running sometime next year, it would create a health record for a patient that could be accessed systemwide.

“I would be able to see this person’s basic history and where they’ve been recently,” Halloran said. “All of the people participating in his care, from the primary doctor, to the substance abuse counselor to the adult drug court people would be able to immediately communicate without each having to ask the client the same questions over and over again.”

Mark Smith, a Berkeley resident who was formerly homeless, said the grant would allow people to get help without having to go to many different organizations.

“I know from my experience people need different things,” said Smith, a member of the Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless Consumer/Community Advisory Board. “Among homeless people you might get health care you need but the benefits are stunted by the stress of living on the street.”

Tags: [homeless](#)



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