

The Way Station

A resting point on the journey: A safe and welcoming facility where individuals and families experiencing homelessness can find a constellation of services to assist their transition to sustainable housing and access to social and health services.

Lead partners developed a combined vision and plan for The Way Station which will be home to a variety of co-located services that will provide a cost-effective approach to improving health outcomes for this population and filling identified gaps in the care continuum. Now more than ever, COVID-19 has highlighted the insufficiency of public hygiene services and the risks that presents.



Project scope and services

Recuperative respite care staffed 24-7

Health care services provided by Unity Care (Medical, BH services, & Substance Use care) with expanded access to laboratory testing for illness, vaccine administration, and health monitoring.

Hygiene services: restrooms, shower and laundry facilities, and a hot room to eradicate body bugs found in belongings.

Case management services will be provided linking visitors and medical respite residents with social and health care service resources.

Potential public health services, such as continued needle exchange site and reproductive health services.

Connections to stable housing

Location Proposed

The Whatcom County 1500 State Street property is an optimal location for The Way Station.

- Adequate square footage to support proposed services
- Ideal location - proximity to downtown, transportation facilities, and other social and health services including the Opportunity Council and Unity Care NW
- Property already includes service delivery on site (e.g. needle exchange)
- Anticipating minimal community concern over location

Next steps

There are two funding streams partners are considering and the city and county should also consider: the capital campaign and the ongoing funding of operations. Community support will be required for long term viability and business model is dependent on some ongoing operational support annually. Partners would like to work with Whatcom County to enter into MOUs that will support near term facility planning and tenant modifications.

Unique collaboration involves many

Community partners have been engaged since the start in researching models, touring facilities and envisioning The Way Station. The exploration resulted in several lead partners stepping forward to develop the plan.

Lead partners



Supporting & consultative partners



Additional Background

Patients experiencing homelessness who come to the hospital for care need respite beds and a space where they can recuperate and heal after discharge on a temporary basis. Medical respite, as defined by the Respite Care Provider's Network, is "acute and post-acute medical care for homeless persons who are too ill or frail to recover from a physical illness or injury on the streets but are not ill enough to be in a hospital." PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center (PHSJMC) routinely refer individuals to several reserved respite beds at the Lighthouse Mission or approve hotel vouchers for these individuals, but hotel stays lack needed services that could provide a wraparound care environment during that transition, resulting in better outcomes for both the patient and the community.

Over a 12-month span between 2018-2019, nearly 300 hospital patients locally were cared for as inpatients that were identified as experiencing homeless. Those nearly 300 inpatients had more than 2,000 inpatient days and more than 900 of those days fell above the typical length of stay we would have expected. This data story makes the case for how the addition of recuperative respite beds could be a supportive community solution. In the same time period, the emergency department cared for nearly 300 patients who were identified as homeless and accounted for almost 400 encounters which did not result in admission to the hospital. Due to the way homelessness is recorded in the medical record, these numbers are believed to underrepresent the total need.

Many prolonged lengths of stays could be avoided or at least mitigated by discharging medically stable patients to medical respite where they could receive proper aftercare as indicated. For the homeless individual, medical respite greatly reduces competing priorities (e.g., food, shelter, and safety) and allows them to safely heal and access wrap around services, including services that help patients access long-term housing.

Respite bed models exist in other communities and some have received national praise, including one such model developed in partnership with Providence in Spokane (see article) and the Edward Thomas House in Seattle. Medical respite has the potential to significantly improve the lives of a severely vulnerable population while reducing hospital admissions, decreasing inpatient days, and increasing outpatient provider visits (Biederman, Gamble, Wilson, Douglas, & Feigal, 2019). The model also promises to reduce repeat visits to the emergency department.

As a Federally-Qualified Health Center, Unity Care NW is similarly challenged with the unique health care needs of its homeless population. In 2018, Unity Care NW reported serving 3,535 homeless patients. Those patients experiencing homelessness would benefit from a dedicated facility offering behavioral health, housing search and counseling services, case management, and primary medical services specific to the homeless population, including wound and foot care. The work of health care providers is made more difficult by lack of community hygiene facilities. Health care providers worry about the spread of Hepatitis A resulting from inadequate sanitation facilities and body bugs (e.g., bed bugs, scabies, body lice) are more difficult to treat in the absence of shower and laundry facilities. The launch of the Lighthouse Mission's "Shower Connect" program earlier this year has alleviated this problem, but readily accessible shower and laundry facilities are a continuing need.

An initial \$400,000 has been committed by PeaceHealth to advance the planning for The Way Station. These community benefit funds were awarded in January 2020 and require a fiscal sponsor that can receive and steward the funds.