MEDICAL FACILITY FOR LYNN’S HOMELESS COULD CLOSE DUE TO LACK OF FUNDING
LYNN — For the past three years, Bridgewell's Recuperative Care Center has provided temporary housing and medical care for the city's homeless after they are discharged from the hospital.

However, while city and state officials recognize the services provided by the recuperative care center, located downtown on Buffum Street, are much-needed in the community, “nobody at this point is willing to pay for it,” said Bridgewell CEO Chris Tuttle.

Through its partnership with Lynn Community Health Center, Bridgewell's RCC strives to cut down on repeat emergency visits by providing patients with on-site medical and recuperative care.

If Bridgewell is not able to secure additional funding by April 1, Tuttle said he will be forced to shut down the center on June 30, 2021.

Funding looked even more bleak a few weeks ago before North Shore Medical Center agreed to provide a one-time payment of $200,000 starting on Feb. 1, which will cover the center's operating costs through the end of the fiscal year, Tuttle said.
“I’m very grateful to North Shore Medical Center for realizing the importance of this program and providing this, but it’s still just a one-time funding. We’re off the cliff a little bit but at the end of the spring we’re in the same scenario. It gives us a little bit of breathing room, but we’re still in a desperate situation.”

The RCC has mainly been supported by a three-year, $1.2 million Factor 9, or federal homeless grant, which was part of the funding that became available after Union Hospital closed, Tuttle said.

While he is grateful for additional funding from North Shore Medical Center, which owned the former Union Hospital, Tuttle said Bridgewell needs somewhere between $400,000 to $500,000 each year to keep the RCC program operating.

Bridgewell continues to work with local state representatives, Sen. Brendan Crighton (D-Lynn) and Rep. Daniel Cahill (D-Lynn), in particular, and plans to continue the conversation with North Shore Medical Center and Mass General Brigham (formerly known as Partners HealthCare) about the possibility of future funding, Tuttle said.

“This isn’t about Bridgewell,” said Tuttle. “This isn’t about Lynn Community Health. This is about a specific program that provides a tremendous service not only to the city of Lynn, but to the citizens of Lynn. There’s not a great deal of services out there for homeless individuals. To take one off the table, I think would be devastating for the city and its individuals.”

Since 2017, North Shore Medical Center has contributed $2.9 million to support the Recuperative Care Center in Lynn, said NSMC spokesperson Laura Fleming.

“We are committed to helping keep this valuable resource in our community and have agreed to provide an additional $200,000 in operating support,” said Fleming. “NSMC and Mass General Brigham will work with Bridgewell and the Lynn Community Health Center over the next several months to determine a long-term sustainability plan for the facility.”

Approximately 178 people have been serviced at the RCC since the facility opened in March 2018. Due to budgetary constraints, only 10 people can stay in the 14-bed facility each night. A person’s average length of stay is about 41 days, and ranges from as short as two days to as long as 170 days, according to Bridgewell.

Patients are referred from health centers and hospitals, with most coming from North Shore Medical Center. Over the past three years, the average age for patients has been 52 years old, a much older population than what Bridgewell was expecting, Tuttle said, noting the RCC team had expected the majority of guests to be between 18 to 30 years old.

“Homelessness is a significant issue,” said Tuttle. “Probably why we’re seeing an older population is these are people who have been on the streets for a long time. The older they get and the conditions they’re living in, we’re seeing more and more health issues and that’s how they end up at the RCC.”

In addition to providing temporary lodging, medical and recuperative services for the city’s homeless, Bridgewell has helped secure permanent housing for 43 patients who have come through the RCC over the past three years, Tuttle said.
One of those patients, Ronald Petty, 65, had been homeless for more than three decades before he was referred to the Recuperative Care Center. After spending a few months in the program, Bridgewell was able to help him find housing, he said.

After living on the streets for nearly 35 years, Petty now has a place to call home. He has been living in an apartment complex on Silsbee Street for the past year and a half. Thanks to help he received from a Bridgewell case manager, he is now receiving Social Security and retirement benefits, which are allowing him to pay his rent each month, Petty said.

Petty was referred to the RCC after he received his first operation for painful bunions that had formed on his feet, which hindered his ability to walk. Since his feet were in casts, he could no longer be on the street and was directed to the center for further treatment, he said.

Before his stint at the RCC, Petty credits a medical advocate he met at My Brother's Table for helping him to get his life back on track. At the time, he had given up on life — he was unable to find work due to his psychological issues and was drinking heavily. His advocate directed him to a detox center, which helped him get clean before he stayed at the RCC.

"It's like a hospital setting," said Petty. "The staff treated me with dignity. That's one reason why I really got my stuff together because people treated me with respect. That's why I stopped my drinking and I started caring for myself and got myself back together, because people cared for me. That's where I'm at right now. I don't drink and I'm taking better care of myself and that's thanks to Bridgewell and Lynn Community Health."

After nearly four years of homelessness, Jose Diaz, 52, was thrilled to finally be moving into his new apartment on Monday, which happens to be in the same Silsbee Street building as Petty, his new neighbor.

Diaz became homeless after he had a bad fall and broke his back, which left him unable to work. The injury was demoralizing for Diaz, who had prided himself on his work ethic — he had been working two jobs at the time, he said.

He became depressed and started drinking heavily. The alcoholism slowly started to destroy various aspects of his life, which resulted in him making poor choices that affected his relationships, particularly with his two daughters, Diaz said.

"Now, I'm accepting help," said Diaz, who spent about eight months at the RCC between his two separate stints. "I didn't realize how much help I needed until I started taking it and the results are amazing. I know for a fact that without this place I wouldn't be in the place that I'm at right now. They got me housing. That (alone) says it all."
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