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HEALTH CARE FOR THOSE WITH NO HOMES

Shelter KC Offers Medical Help

Telemedicine for Homeless with Underlying Medical Issues

Consulting a doctor by using the Internet has become the new normal. But to those without a home, and without access to the Internet, doctor visits can be a real problem. Shelter KC (formerly Kansas City Rescue Mission) is giving the homeless the access they need.

Those who live rough on the streets frequently suffer from a variety of serious medical maladies. Often these long-standing medical issues contribute to homelessness. High blood pressure, diabetes and other chronic conditions require medication every day. With medical oversight and proper medication, these health issues can be managed. But the homeless have trouble keeping appointments to get that medication and the care they need.

In the current coronavirus setting, it is tricky to identify and treat the homeless with underlying health conditions. Shelter KC has collaborated with the Healthcare for the Homeless program at Swope Healthcare to set up a process so individuals who are homeless can use telemedicine to be seen by a doctor. In addition, the shelter connects them with pharmacies for their prescriptions and with dentists for oral health issues.

Elizabeth Preston, RN, is “Nurse Liz” to the staff and guests at Shelter KC. She has served the desperately poor of the community for the past ten years. “I feel privileged that Shelter KC chose me to work with our most vulnerable populations. I have been

given the opportunity to provide health care to those who otherwise wouldn't have any access to it," says Nurse Liz.

Her work has preceded this pandemic. And now her work at Shelter KC addresses these health issues as part of the recovery and restoration process to get people back into society.

"We provide a home-like setting for those with no home," said Eric Burger, executive director of Shelter KC. "Our goals are simple, but not easy. We are doing our best to keep those who need us healthy, safe, encouraged, fed and sheltered."

The staff at Shelter KC works tirelessly to help those with no place to go. The mission is taking extensive precautions to offer the homeless a safe way to shelter in place along with giving them access to medical care.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, things have changed at Shelter KC. "We are scrupulously following and exceeding every protocol that the health authorities have recommended," according to Nurse Liz. "We take healthcare directives very seriously: hand washing, taking temperatures, screening for symptoms, wearing masks and gloves, etc.

"It is always a challenge to enforce social distancing among the homeless. The people we help here are like a family sheltering at home, except that no one is related. What you're doing at home for your loved ones is the same thing we are doing for strangers here."

Shelter KC considers it a duty to treat the coronavirus and other medical issues aggressively. This began with substantially strengthened cleaning protocols. While keeping a safe distance, the Mission has been checking everyone who comes in for fever and virus symptoms. There is social distancing for everyone in the building and handwashing hygiene for everyone.

In addition, Shelter KC has removed some beds from the overnight shelter for men to provide appropriate distancing. At the women's facility, extensive cleaning, social distancing and reduced interaction has been instituted. At either location, anyone with symptoms is immediately referred to health agencies equipped to serve them.

Some staff are working from home, but many staff members are on site, carrying additional responsibilities to continue basic operations. All volunteer activities have been suspended for the time being.

This pandemic comes with increased financial burdens as well. Supplies get used up every day. With the economy taking a hit and so many people not working, Shelter KC donations have taken a hit as well.

“This drop off in donations comes just as we are challenged to serve more people in trouble. Now more than ever before, we need the financial support of the community so we can respond to these challenges and be equipped to serve in the weeks and months ahead,” said Shelter KC Executive Director Eric Burger.

Nurse Liz has her own list of needed items. “Anything you need for your family, we need here,” she said. “Tissues, masks, gloves, prevention-type things like over-the-counter cold remedies. With 50 men sheltering in place we also need clothing items, especially socks and underwear.”

Whatever the public donates, goes directly to help those in need.

Anyone who wants to help can go to the Mission’s website <https://www.shelterkc.org>.

Shelter KC – A Kansas City Rescue Mission is a Christ-centered community offering freedom and hope to the poor and homeless, empowering them to reach their full potential. Established in 1950, it has been our ongoing mission to serve people in desperate need.

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Reporters/editors: Nurse Liz is available every weekday for on-camera, phone or video interviews. She is at the men’s facility at 1520 Cherry Street in Kansas City, MO 64108 on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. She is at the Women’s Center at 2611 E. 11th Street, Kansas City, MO 64127 on Thursdays. Contact Abby, Connie or Eric at the numbers above.