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Home is where the heroes are

By CLAIRE F. GOYER

Health Care for the Homeless Day, which is tomorrow, is part of National Health Center Week 2008. This year's theme, "America's Health Centers: Home of America's Health Care Heroes," highlights the vital role of health center providers in achieving the mission of a community health center — access to primary care for persons who are underserved by the mainstream system.

Health Care for the Homeless Day recognizes the special needs of a vulnerable population — and the unique role that staff such as those at the Duffy Health Center play in providing essential care to over two thousand Cape Codders.

Clients come to us from every town on Cape Cod. They may have had one stroke of bad luck or may have struggled all their lives with violence, poverty, trauma, addiction and mental illness. Many have been crushed by anxiety and depression. Duffy staff — from our medical director to our other clinicians and case managers to front office receptionists — offer a nonjudgmental trust relationship and the ability, in the words of one client, "to make me believe that participating in my treatment will help me to become the person I want to be."

The intensity of need among our medically complex population results in six times the rate of visits by clients as compared to traditional community health centers. Last year, 2,266 homeless or at-risk clients came to our clinic for more than 24,000 visits.

Our primary-care staff work hand in hand with our mental health and addiction counselors and case managers to provide care and to affirm each individual's resiliency in the face of often overwhelming circumstances. They meet clients where they are — physically and emotionally. Our hope is that over time each client can begin to address and resolve the underlying causes of homelessness.

Yet, without housing, even our excellent health services are but a band-aid. For our clients, health is housing. With housing comes dramatic

improvements in health, the ability to strive for recovery, manage health conditions, and an incentive to rejoin the wider community.

Over the past three years our nine case managers have placed more than 150 persons in either transitional or permanent housing. Duffy's Housing First program has provided more than 60 persons with permanent housing and support services during the transition out of chronic homelessness.

In spite of the uphill battle our clients face, and increasing economic pressures, we see growing regional coordination among health and human service agencies working together to implement real solutions to end homelessness. Some of these efforts are being recognized at the local, state and federal levels.

This Aug. 13 Duffy staff will celebrate three years of developing housing as a practical response to improving the chronic health conditions of our clients.

We salute collaborative efforts such as Barnstable's *In from the Streets*, Pilot House and *Home & Healthy for Good*, all designed to promote access to housing while also providing the necessary support and case management services.

We applaud Gov. Patrick's recent initiative to move away from the shelter system and toward rapid re-housing. This and other ongoing efforts by community, municipal and faith-based groups underscore new models that work.

On Health Care for the Homeless Day, the Duffy Health Center will, along with other homeless health centers across the country, salute our heroes — a staff that is unparalleled in its dedication, expertise and commitment to clients. We will also salute the citizens and housing advocates across Cape Cod who are working to end homelessness in our towns.

Salute a hero on Health Care for the Homeless Day. Or become one.

Claire F. Goyer is chief executive officer of the Duffy Health Center in Hyannis.