

The Boulevard: Restoring health and rebuilding lives for Chicago's homeless

By Monica M. Walk

The Boulevard can mean the difference between life and death, between a road to recovery or continued health-related challenges. A medical respite center for homeless adults, The Boulevard provides a free, high-quality, post-hospital landing place for people with no home to return to for recuperation.

For many, the opportunity to heal in comfort and safety with appropriate medical care and counseling leads to a whole-life rejuvenation that includes stable housing and leaving the streets behind. The Boulevard affirms this transformation goal with the motto: "The Road to Health & Home."

"We restore health and rebuild lives," said Nancy Hanson, who has volunteered in a variety of capacities with the organization for more than 20 years, including its steering committee and first board of directors. Now retired from social work focused on policy administration, Hanson was introduced to the respite facility, then called Interfaith House, soon after its founding by religious and community members on the West Side in 1994—a time when Chicago had few homeless shelters and none with a focus on medical recuperation.

Three years ago, the organiza-



Photo by Christopher Valentino

Boulevard CEO Jennifer Nelson-Seals (center) discussing Boulevard business with two of her staff members.

tion renamed itself to differentiate it from other similarly named groups and to better describe its focus. It remains the only facility of its type in Chicago.

Hanson found herself captivated by the center's hands-on work. "They are amazing people—mothers, daughters, fathers, brothers—who made poor choices," she said of the residents she has met. "Many are addicted to alcohol or drugs. All have lost their health in some way through illness or injury. Our holistic approach gives them a

hand up, not a handout."

The facility's first resident epitomized the organization's mission. A former Vietnam War P.O.W. amputee with no home address had been discharged from hospital treatment of an infected stump and found his way to the just opened care center. He had been declared dead during five years of imprisonment in the war, came home to the U.S. to discover his wife had remarried and his family had moved on, and turned to drugs and alcohol to cope.

Renewed life

The respite care facility was so new that staff members still were creating services—they shared their own food with their first resident. By the time he had healed physically, center staff had connected him with benefits and back pay, relocated him to a new home, and developed conduits with medical, veterans, and social services in the area. For years, he visited the facility to express his appreciation for his renewed life.

All the residents are now referred by social workers at hospitals and social service agencies. The facility staff maintains focus on getting people healthy and off the streets and into housing. The 64-bed facility has served more than 8,000 adult residents since 1994.

Boulevard CEO Jennifer Nelson-Seals, who has been with the facility since its founding, reported that 90% of residents complete their medical recuperation, and 70% go on to stable housing. Short-term affordable housing is hard to find in Chicago, much of it disappearing with neighborhood gentrification focused on luxury condo construction. "We work closely with others to find permanent housing," she said. "Our goal is to end homelessness."

Social worker Miriam Mixon, a

behavioral healthcare coordinator with the Medicaid Managed Care Organization (MCO) IlliniCare, refers residents to The Boulevard and maintains contact as a caseworker to ensure continuity of medical and social service care.

Great array of services

"The Boulevard provides a great array of services," she said. "They use the empowerment model, which involves individuals in developing their own treatment plan. These are people not used to other people rallying around them. Knowing they are cared about, they are more likely to adhere to a treatment plan. It doesn't feel like a shelter. It feels like an apartment with services."

Mixon noted the referral relationship greatly reduces more expensive hospital use. She reported a reduction of in-patient hospital admittance and emergency room (ER) visits of 93% for residents. CEO Nelson-Seals cited IlliniCare statistics that followed 22 individuals for nine months. Their combined 524 ER visits and 199 inpatient days prior to The Boulevard were reduced to 16 ER visits and 12 in-patient days. Residents at The Boulevard average a stay of three to four months, with flexibility to extend stays when needed.

"The chronically homeless are high users of the hospital system," Nelson-Seals said. "This is a significant savings. IlliniCare personnel

are cheerleaders. This actually works."

The Boulevard has a Federally Qualified Health Center onsite, including two licensed social workers, a nurse, physical and behavioral health professionals, case managers, and housing advocates. Services include taking residents to off-site appointments, such as with primary care physicians and to the Social Security office, as well as monitoring medication and healing and providing a safe place to eat and sleep.

"It makes sense to do more of this," Mixon said. "Situations become less dire. A resident on a transplant list improved so much at The Boulevard, he no longer needs a transplant. There are so many benefits. Residents are stabilized and reconnect with families. They contribute and give back when they can."

Appreciation and volunteerism from former residents is common.

"Alums come back to give back; they say, 'This place changed my life,'" said board chair Veronica Buckley, a faculty member at DePaul University. She began volunteering at the respite center 19 years ago as a student and wrote the young organization's first human resources handbook and policy manual.

Change agent

"We are a change agent in the
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community, very mission-driven, the real deal with real commitment," Buckley said "So much is where you are born, the economic station you are born into, an abusive household; you have no control when you are young. Hearing back-stories is numbing. So often there is abuse and neglect. They lose self-esteem and feel worthless—the people who are supposed to love you, don't. It's very moving. That is someone's baby, someone's dad, someone's mother. It's a fluke it's not me or you. These people didn't ask for it."

Like the very first resident, many people healing at The Boulevard have been homeless veterans. "It's heartbreaking," Buckley said. "Think about being homeless, cold, and hungry. Then, think about being sick. How can they possibly rebuild their lives? We need more places like this. This place works because residents realize we really care about them. It's a vocation."

Social worker Mixon praised the non-judgmental atmosphere at the Boulevard as an element of program success. "People need a break sometimes," she said. "They do a great job of not giving up on people."

Stephen Brown, director of preventive emergency medicine at



Photo by Christopher Valentino

Jennifer Nelson-Seals of The Boulevard meeting with residents who are benefiting from the institution's services.

the University of Illinois Hospital and Health Sciences System (UI Health), sits on a Chicagoland sub-committee on housing and health which is investigating the current number of respite beds in the city and identifying new beds.

He noted that respite beds like the ones at The Boulevard "are an important healthcare asset," said Brown. "These are for homeless patients who are not sick enough for a nursing home, so they tend to end up staying in hospitals longer than they should because hospitals can't discharge a patient to the

street. Without respite beds where these patients who need additional care can go, it can be very expensive to care for them."

Residents often arrive at The Boulevard with only the clothing they are wearing. Donations ensure they have necessities as they regain health. Monetary contributions support housing, healthcare, meals and snacks, transportation to appointments, clothing, and toiletries.

When residents move from the facility into stable housing, The Boulevard ensures a positive tran-

sition. "When we set up an apartment, we have a network or organizations who will set it up with beds, dishes, towels, etc.," said director of development Tim Drake of the 150 individuals who regularly support the facility. "We help provide a housewarming."

Donations of toiletries, over-the-counter medications, socks, underwear, gift cards, and healthcare items are welcome.

The Boulevard will help individuals and organizations set up donation drives or volunteer days. Its Share a Meal Program provides the opportunity for churches, organizations, and individuals to cook or donate a meal for the residents.

Volunteer facilitators are invited to lead discussions on educational topics such as health, employment and housing opportunities, computer and interpersonal communication skills, and nutrition and budgeting. More than 1,000 educational sessions are scheduled each year.

The associate board also welcomes new members to network to spread news of The Boulevard and to host social fundraising events to help bring in new donors and volunteers.

The Boulevard is located at 3456 W. Franklin Blvd. Call (773) 533-6013 or log on to www.blvd.org.