

A Fresh Start for the Homeless

Shelter is one of our most fundamental needs, yet on any given day in Larimer County anywhere from 600 to 2,000* men, women and children roam the streets, sleep under bridges and seek refuge in churches, public buildings and homeless facilities.

Until recently, Matthew (not his real name) was among them. In his mid-40s, Matthew was “paroled to the streets” after serving 10 years in prison for drug-related offenses. He returned to Fort Collins, where he had lived before prison, and took up residence in an alleyway outside the Spirit Crossing Clubhouse, a rehabilitation center run by Larimer Center for Mental Health.

Last year, Matthew was referred to a new program for the chronically homeless run by the Community Dual Disorders Team (CDDT), a partnership of Larimer Center for Mental Health, Fort Collins Housing Authority, city of Fort Collins and Health District of Northern Larimer County. The CDDT’s innovative treatment approach, known as “permanent supportive housing,” is based on an evidence-based treatment model that provides housing, counseling and other support to homeless people who suffer from mental illness and substance use disorders.

Through the program, Matthew got a new lease on life — a warm, safe place to stay and support to keep him off drugs and stabilize his mental illness.

“This apartment means more than diamonds, more than silver...because I have my own place,” Matthew says. “I have been through hell in my life...and I’m a survivor.”

Moreover, Matthew will soon be out from under his legal problems. “With the help of our program, he’s about ready to get off parole,” says Janelle Patrias, a Health District program specialist and key player with the CDDT partnership.

According to conservative estimates, a third of people who are homeless have a serious mental illness, and more than half of those also have a substance use disorder. CDDT’s multifaceted treatment approach has the potential to vastly decrease use of taxpayer-funded emergency room care, hospitalization, incarceration and detox.

“One thing that’s notable is we’ve had a 100 percent retention rate,” Patrias says. None of the 12 participants has dropped out of the program — impressive considering their high level of needs and complex lives.

“I’m just mighty thankful that I was chosen to be put in CDDT,” says Matthew, who wants to become a peer counselor with encouragement from his therapist at the Larimer Center for Mental Health. “I hope to help people in society to where they can have the beautiful things that I have,” he says.

“I have a wonderful life ahead of me.”

**Precise statistics on homelessness remain elusive. Official surveys tend to undercount the homeless, and “point-in-time” counts of unsheltered individuals are also challenging in terms of accuracy.*

The CDDT program is an example of the services the Health District’s Community Impact Team has helped create. It works with partner organizations to find long-term solutions to complex health issues affecting our community.

Health Screening Triggers Diabetes Diagnosis for CSU Student

When Charles Thangaraj, 28, stopped in for a health screening at Colorado State University recently, he was there to get his cholesterol, blood-pressure and blood-sugar levels checked — and to say thanks to the Health District nurses doing the screenings.

Thangaraj, a CSU electrical engineering student, wanted to show his gratitude for the results of a similar screening he underwent two and a half years earlier that changed his life forever.

In fall 2006, Thangaraj dropped by the Wellness Zone in CSU’s Lory Student Center for his first screening, and a Health District nurse advised him to see a doctor immediately based on results from the test.

The screenings are part of the Health District’s Health Promotion program, which provides heart-disease screenings and services such as nutritional and stop-smoking counseling to residents of northern Larimer County.

“The nurse found that I had roughly twice the level of blood sugar than what she expected to see,” says Thangaraj.

So Thangaraj visited a physician at CSU’s Hartshorn Health Service, who diagnosed him with type 2 diabetes.

“It was a hard thing to accept,” Thangaraj says. “The main thing was

the shock value of it. Most people, when they get this kind of shock, go into denial.”

But Thangaraj is an engineer, and “knowing the problem is half the solution,” he says. So he took action to solve his new problem.

“He took the news very seriously,” recalls Cheri Nichols, nurse supervisor at the Health District. “He met with a dietitian, did significant research about the illness and how to best manage it, started on medication, stopped smoking, implemented numerous nutrition strategies and began an activity routine,” she says.

Now Thangaraj, a Ph.D. candidate who will graduate this summer, is successfully managing his diabetes and focusing on staying healthy. He’s lost 30 pounds and taken up cycling.

“You found my diabetes and helped me change my life,” Thangaraj told Nichols at his most recent screening. In exchange for the thanks, Nichols sent him away with good news — significantly improved blood-sugar and cholesterol profile results that Thangaraj said he couldn’t wait to show his physician.

Heart-disease screenings are provided free of charge to CSU students by the university’s Hartshorn Health Service in partnership with the Health District’s Health Promotion program.



Project Smile Gives Kids Bigger Chance at Success

He may not actually be Superman, but Guillermo Medina is a real hero.

The principal of Irish Elementary School in Fort Collins has been known to don a red cape and blue suit with stylized "S" and leap through school hallways faster than a speeding student late to lunch.

Like his comic book alter ego, Medina also has a superpower: the ability to change lives one smile at a time.

Thanks to Project Smile — an effort close to Medina's heart — 289 students at Irish received dental screenings in 2008, with 105 cavities filled in the process. "Students are thankful because they're pain-free. It's really hard for them to verbalize what was wrong because they didn't know any different. Now kids are better able to focus, and life has improved for them on all levels," Medina says.

Now in its third year, Project Smile was started by the North Fort Collins Business Association (NFCBA) and operates in partnership with area businesses and dentists, Poudre School District, the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado and the Health District of Northern Larimer County's Family Dental Clinic. It is part of a larger nonprofit, Realities for Children, which helps youth in Larimer County.

"None of these people have to do what they're doing. As a principal, I do," says Medina. "I'm very proud to be part of a community that takes care of their children."

Project Smile is doing just that under the leadership of chairman Ron Lautzenheiser, owner of Big O Tires on North College Avenue. "It's a God thing," Lautzenheiser explains. "I mean, I'm a tire guy. I'm not a dentist. I hadn't even been in an elementary school except to drop off my grandkids."

The Health District's Family Dental Clinic provides the professional staff necessary to do dental screenings at Irish Elementary in support of Project Smile.

That changed in 2006 when the NFCBA wanted to help Irish. Lautzenheiser decided he should at least visit the school before recommending that the board make a \$500 donation. "I didn't know what to expect, but what I saw were well-taught, highly disciplined, happy kids," Lautzenheiser says. "I didn't appreciate the scale of need. It's our long-term goal to make dental care available to every kid in Poudre School District."

Medina says practicing regular brushing and good nutrition — just like exercising and reading — are essential to healthy, productive children inside the classroom and out.

"Project Smile goes beyond school," says the man of steel with a heart of gold. "It's a leg up, not a handout."



TOOTHY GRINS
Irish Elementary principal Guillermo Medina is pictured with toothbrush-wielding students (L to R) Thalia Cesar, Cierra Ortiz and Sidney Brown.

Prescription Assistance Puts Vital Medications Within Reach

Modern-day pharmaceuticals are a true wonder, but not if the people who need them can't afford them.

The Health District of Northern Larimer County's Prescription Assistance program helps people with limited incomes acquire the prescription medications they need to live healthy lives — or simply to live.

"Because of them [Prescription Assistance], I'm still living independently, and I'm alive," says Fort Collins resident Judy Corrado, who has a chronic lung condition that makes it very difficult for her to breathe.

The illness cost Corrado not only her health but also her job as a restaurant general manager. "My income suddenly fell from \$60,000 a year to \$14,000 a year," she says.

Some concerned friends mentioned the Prescription Assistance program to her, and things quickly changed for the better after that.

Corrado came to the Health District in late 2007, after getting out of the hospital with prescriptions costing \$600 a month, which she couldn't afford. With the help of Andrea Loftus, a Health District prescription assistance advocate, Corrado's \$600 monthly prescription bill dropped to \$38 a month. A few months later, when she needed to switch to an even

more expensive inhaler medication, the cost dropped from \$700 a month to \$40 a month.

"Andrea worked her tail off to make it more affordable," says Corrado. "She's gracious, kind, understanding, helpful," the grateful 64-year-old adds.

To qualify for help from Prescription Assistance, a person needs to meet income guidelines and live in northern Larimer County or have a physician within Poudre Valley Health System. The program partners with certain drug manufacturers that provide free or low-cost medications to people who qualify. In addition, the Health District provides vouchers that program

participants can use, with a small co-payment, to purchase medication at participating local pharmacies.

Corrado's ability to afford her medication has resulted in dramatically fewer emergency trips to the hospital (nine hospitalizations in the year prior to coming to Prescription Assistance and only one since). And she's even returned to work, this time as a salesperson at Center Partners telemarketing firm.

Organizations helping make the Prescription Assistance program possible include Poudre Valley Health System, Poudre Valley Hospital's Family Medicine Center, and numerous local pharmacies, including Albertsons, City Drug, Good Day, King Soopers, Poudre Rexall and Safeway.