

## Medical service helps homeless

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GRAYSLAKE -- On a 10-degree night, Mike said he took a Pace bus as far as the College of Lake County, and then walked the remaining mile down Washington Street to Shepherd of the Lakes Lutheran Church.

As the primary shelter each Monday for PADS Crisis Services of Lake County, the church offers the homeless 29-year-old a number of helping hands -- a hot meal, a bed, a room to watch new DVD releases. The week before, he was given a leather jacket donated by the Grayslake Police Department.

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**Melvin Mass, a PADS guest at Shepherd of the Lakes Church in Grayslake, gets his blood pressure checked by nurse Evelyn Rossi of the Lake County Health Department.**

*(Joe Shuman/Special to the News-Sun)*

"It's like a second family here," said Mike, who asked to keep his last name private. "They don't judge you ... They give us a second chance."

While the day-to-day services help Mike make it through the winter, he recently made use of a PADS offering that will aid his long-term survival -- the Healthcare for the Homeless program, in which doctors and nurses from the Lake County Health Department provide free medical evaluations and treatment.

"I never knew I had high blood pressure," said the young man who, with a boyish face, doesn't look like a candidate for the condition. "They check your hearing, your heart, your blood pressure ... They helped me with a prescription, but it didn't work (after) four weeks, so they gave me another. Now it's been two months, and it's going down."

As Mike shared his story on Monday night, tables and chairs were set up in a church hallway to serve as a waiting and check-in area. Separate classrooms were reserved as treatment rooms for two public health nurses and Dr. Saquib Ahmed, who practices by day at one of the five Health Department public clinics.

Ahmed said he's been involved in the Homeless program since its inception in 2005, and has struck a rapport with his PADS patients.

"I usually see about 10 to 15 a night," Ahmed said. "I know most of these people because I've been working here for three years ... I work at the North Chicago clinic, and they look for me there. There are other primary-care doctors, but they want to see me."

One woman Ahmed sat down with on Monday had a chronic lung condition that required her to take several medications. With the arrival of winter weather, she told him, "I get a tickle in my throat when I sleep at night, and Halls ain't doing it."

Upon learning that she smokes cigarettes, Ahmed first urged her to kick the habit and discussed some treatment options toward that goal. He then ordered medication for her cough, a prescription that would be filled by PADS volunteers driving to a local Walgreen's.

"He's all right," the woman said to a bystander as she walked out of the room.

The number of PADS clients making use of the Healthcare for the Homeless program has exceeded expectations, according to Angela Trotta, a grants specialist with the Health Department. She said Chicago-based Heartland Health Outreach contacted the department three years ago about utilizing federal funds to provide medical care for the homeless.

PADS was selected as a partner in the project, with an annual goal of providing aid to 250 patients with a total of 625 visits. Between December 2007 and the end of November 2008, Trotta said, records show 279 patients making 670 visits, even though PADS sites are closed from May through September.

"We provide any type of acute care. This time of year, we see a lot of people with colds and flu," Trotta said. "We also see a lot of patients with high blood pressure and diabetes, and a lot of it is uncontrolled. (We) try to get them to one of our clinic sites for follow-up care."

Evelyn Rossi, who has been a Health Department nurse for 18 years, said she sees many examples of the gap in health care coverage for the homeless. Two of the more frequent questions she finds herself asking clients as she registers them are, "When was the last time you saw a doctor?" and "Do you have a doctor?"

"Some of the people here will say, 'Oh, yeah, I see Dr. Ahmed at the clinic,'" Rossi said. "But we'll have people who are brand-new to the area, and they'll say, 'Oh, I haven't seen a doctor in years.'

"We had a man last year who had high blood pressure," she recalled, "and I said, 'Do you take medication?' and he said, 'Oh, yeah, but I finished it.' He thought it was like an antibiotic."

Fortunately for PADS clients who might have no other medical options, Trotta said funding for the Healthcare for the Homeless program has been locked in through at least the next five years.