

Program goal: health care for homeless

By Steven Scarpa, Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN — Dr. Susan Hadley started volunteering at area homeless shelters years ago. While caring for the homeless can be challenging, she said the reward of the work could be immediate.

“We want to go wherever the people are,” she said.

To that end, Hadley is the medical director of Wherever You Are, a Community Health Center program, charged with setting up a small clinic at Shelter NOW, the city’s homeless shelter on St. Casimir Drive.

The goal is to provide basic, free medical care to the people who are arguably the most disconnected from the health care system — the homeless. Center officials have applied for federal grant money and expect to get it for three years. However, should they not receive the money, they have committed to keeping the clinic alive, Hadley said.

The program, while under way, is still somewhat in its planning stages, Hadley said. More equipment for the medical center should be ordered in the next month, and there are plans to offer dental care. Plans are also being crafted to take medical care into the community, to where the homeless stay.

“We would like to open this up to people in streets. That is the block. How do we get the word out?” said Joseph Lynes, residential coordinator for the shelter.

Hadley comes to the clinic each Monday from 8 to 10 a.m. Both she and Lynes hope the number of days a week the clinic is open can increase. The first day the clinic opened, Hadley saw more than a dozen patients; she said that, in other communities where clinics have opened, the stream of patients is steady.

“One of the only ways to help people get out of a state of homelessness is to get them healthy,” Hadley said. “Sometimes health just isn’t their priority. Their priority is finding shelter and food.”

Homeless people have few if any health care options, coupled with many health issues. Many of them have respiratory problems, stomach ulcers and psychiatric difficulties, among other things, Hadley said. Without insurance, a trip to a regular doctor or walk-in clinic is out of the question. “I’ve walked up to guys and said, ‘I think you need a doctor,’” Lynes said. “If you get a guy off the street, they have no insurance, we haven’t processed them ... Instead of sending them to the emergency room and costing the taxpayers a lot of money and overloading the ER, we can help them here.”

Once people check into the shelter, Lynes and his staff begin the process of registering them with the state Department of Social Services. “One of the things about state aid is that is they are often given doctors from far away from where they are staying,” Hadley said. “One of our goals is to, ultimately, give them a medical home.”

“We’d like to make the shelter a center point for people so that if they come into the city without insurance, they can come here and have access to health care,” Lynes said.