

County supervisors discuss patient dumping

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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More coordination between county agencies, not to mention more homeless shelter beds, were among the solutions suggested Tuesday during a Yolo County Board of Supervisors discussion on the topic of patient dumping.

The issue of hospitals discharging homeless patients with nowhere to go — who then end up back on the streets in sometimes medically fragile conditions — has made headlines nationally in recent months and is the focus of legislation currently moving through the state Capitol. But it was a local case that brought the matter before county supervisors on Tuesday.

That case involved an elderly Sacramento man who was discharged from Woodland Memorial Hospital late last year and taken by taxi to Sacramento's Union Gospel Mission.

He had not asked to be taken there, Arlan Lewis, 78, told the Sacramento Bee. And when he arrived at the shelter, he learned it had no available beds and nowhere for him to sleep that night.

"I was outside with this big, huge crowd of homeless people," Lewis told the Bee. "It was a scary thing for someone my age. I didn't know what to do. Why would they send me there when they didn't even have a bed for me?"

As the region's homeless population continues to grow, local hospitals are grappling with where to send discharged patients without homes, particularly when most shelters — like Union Gospel — don't take reservations.

"We can't talk about this ... without talking about homelessness issues," Karen Larsen, director of Yolo County's Health and Human Services Agency, told county supervisors on Tuesday.

Yolo County currently has a homeless population of about 460 people on any given day, Larsen noted, and more than half of them are unsheltered.

"So should they become hospitalized, and are discharged, they would be discharged to the street," Larsen said. "There's just not enough beds in the community to provide shelter for them."

And given the high prevalence of health issues among the homeless (Yolo County's 2017 homeless count found 52 percent of the homeless reported at least one serious health condition) the likelihood of them requiring hospitalization is high.

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis noted that living on the street or in a car while still recovering "can't be good for the person medically."

Yolo County's two hospitals — Sutter Davis and Woodland Memorial — both have similar discharge policies, Larsen said, which include assessing a patient's safety, collaborating with community resources and usually providing assistance such as an Uber or taxi ride.

Woodland Memorial's policy "begins with an assessment of the patient's baseline status and results in a discharge plan that ensures the patient has access to food, shelter, clothing and necessary medical after-care," according to Larson

And while not able to comment publicly on Lewis's case, Larsen said the department's investigations into local incidents like his showed "hospitals had done their due diligence."

Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland said he had initially been angry about Woodland Memorial's role in Lewis's case, but now believes the problem is with neighboring counties who send residents to Yolo County for care and then don't make arrangements for them to return home afterward.

Lewis had originally been hospitalized in Sacramento County after sheriff's deputies picked him up in Carmichael as a potential danger to himself or others, according to the Bee.

But he was later transferred by Dignity Health to Woodland Memorial for a week of psychiatric evaluations before being discharged.

"It appeared to me that the counties that are partnering with Dignity in Woodland are not good partners," Rexroad said. "They're dropping them in Woodland and not coming back to get them."

Sutter Health's Holly Harper said she appreciates the attention Yolo County supervisors are paying to this issue, but added "this is not new."

"We take the continuum of care very, very seriously," she said, "(but) there is a marked lack of resources... in this region."

Harper and representatives from Dignity Health described for supervisors what hospitals are doing to ensure patients leaving their care have the support they need, but also noted homelessness is a community-based problem.

The four local health systems in the region — Dignity Health, Kaiser Permanente, Sutter Health and UC Davis Health — have partnered on interim care programs and continue to focus on the issue of homelessness in Sacramento, Harper said.

"That's what Dignity and Sutter are looking at in Yolo County now," she added.

Provenza, meanwhile, asked whether a local law is needed to prevent cases like Lewis' from occurring.

“Can we do an ordinance to cover situations like this?” Provenza asked.

Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento suggested the county first engage further with local hospitals, neighboring counties and other agencies.

“We may end up where you’re suggesting,” Villegas told Provenza.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Ed Hernandez, D-West Covina, has introduced SB 1152, which would prohibit hospitals from discharging a homeless patient to another licensed facility or social services agency unless that provider has agreed to accept the patient. The bill also requires certain conditions to be met prior to discharging a homeless patient.