

Health care for the homeless

By **Kate R. Houlihan**

SUN STAFF

WHEATON — On a late December afternoon, Dr. Hamid Hussein sits at a folding table, papers and assorted medical paraphernalia strewn before him.

Through a door enter Gabriel and her future husband. Gabriel has a bit of a cough and stuffy nose and wants a checkup from Hussein.

But Gabriel is not a typical patient. And this doctor's office isn't at the local hospital.

Sponsored by the Illinois Bureau of Primary Health Care, a new initiative is allowing Access Community Health Network and DuPage Public Action to Deliver Shelter to work in tandem to provide homeless people in DuPage County with medical care.

For the past three months Hussein has been performing routine checkups on Wednesday

afternoons at PADS' Wheaton daytime support center for those who need it.

"Initially, I was reluctant to come," said Hussein, who works at Access' Martin T. Russo Family Health Center in Bloomingdale. "I didn't know what to expect. What I found was a very humane situation. I personally fell in love with the setting."

While the setting may be a simple white-walled room with a wooden floor, it's heaven for the people who step inside. Gabriel, who asked that her last name not be used due to her situation, said times have been tough for her and her 1-year-old daughter, and they're "doing the best we can" to get an apartment. She said being able to visit a doctor is helpful.

"It's wonderful, because it's hard to get medical assistance without an ID card or a social security card," she said. "It's a



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Family physician Hamid Hussein, center, of Martin T. Russo Family Health Center in Bloomington, visits with patient Gabriel and her boyfriend at the DuPage PADS homeless shelter Dec. 26, in Wheaton. Grace Espinosa, standing at left, a development associate with the shelter, said a partnership between the shelter and the health center help the homeless receive medical attention.

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www.dupagepads.org

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good thing that they come. They just ask for your name.”

In addition to Hussein’s visits to the support center, people who use the PADS overnight shelter at the First Church of Lombard on Tuesday nights can receive the same kind of access

to a doctor.

Hussein said the population he deals with is special because the homeless have enough challenges to face without worrying about illness.

“Health care becomes a third or fourth priority after food or shelter,” he said, adding without access to transportation a trip to see a doctor becomes a major hurdle.

Because of that, he said, simple illnesses or conditions can be neglected and grow into larger

problems.

"What could be averted with medicine now costs thousands of dollars (to treat)," he said. "It's a social problem not many are aware of."

But those that are cognizant are working hard to provide solutions. PADS, which helps the homeless via temporary overnight shelters, the daytime support center, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing, sees medical care as a necessary step in the

bring PADS clients to those clinics, but transportation was a limiting factor.

"This was heaven-sent because the clinic could be set up at the support center," Johnson said of the current arrangement.

According to a release, more than 138 people have been seen since the program started. Lynn Markowski, a Russo nurse who works with Hussein and accompanies him to the sites, said they usually see five to nine people each week at the support center and sometimes 10 to 16 at the evening site.

Hussein said he sees patients with illnesses such as colds or diabetes. Basic medicine can be provided, he said. If patients need more specialized attention or a follow-up exam, they are asked to go to the Russo facility.

lives of the homeless.

"They wake up in the morning and they have to be out (of the overnight shelters) in a half-hour," said Kathleen Johnson, development director at PADS. "Their whole world is surviving on the streets and getting to the next (shelter) site ... taking care of themselves is not even on the radar."

Johnson said PADS tried to network with clinics to perhaps

Johnson said between the Illinois Bureau of Primary Health Care, Access and the service-based human-rights organization Heartland Health Outreach, a grant was generated to fund the initiative. She said PADS helps put that grant to good use by linking the program with the people who need the services.

But the patients are also giving back. Hussein's patients at the center recently presented him and his two nurses with a big Christmas card full of signatures, and the nurses got two red roses.

"We wish we could do more," Hussein said.

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