

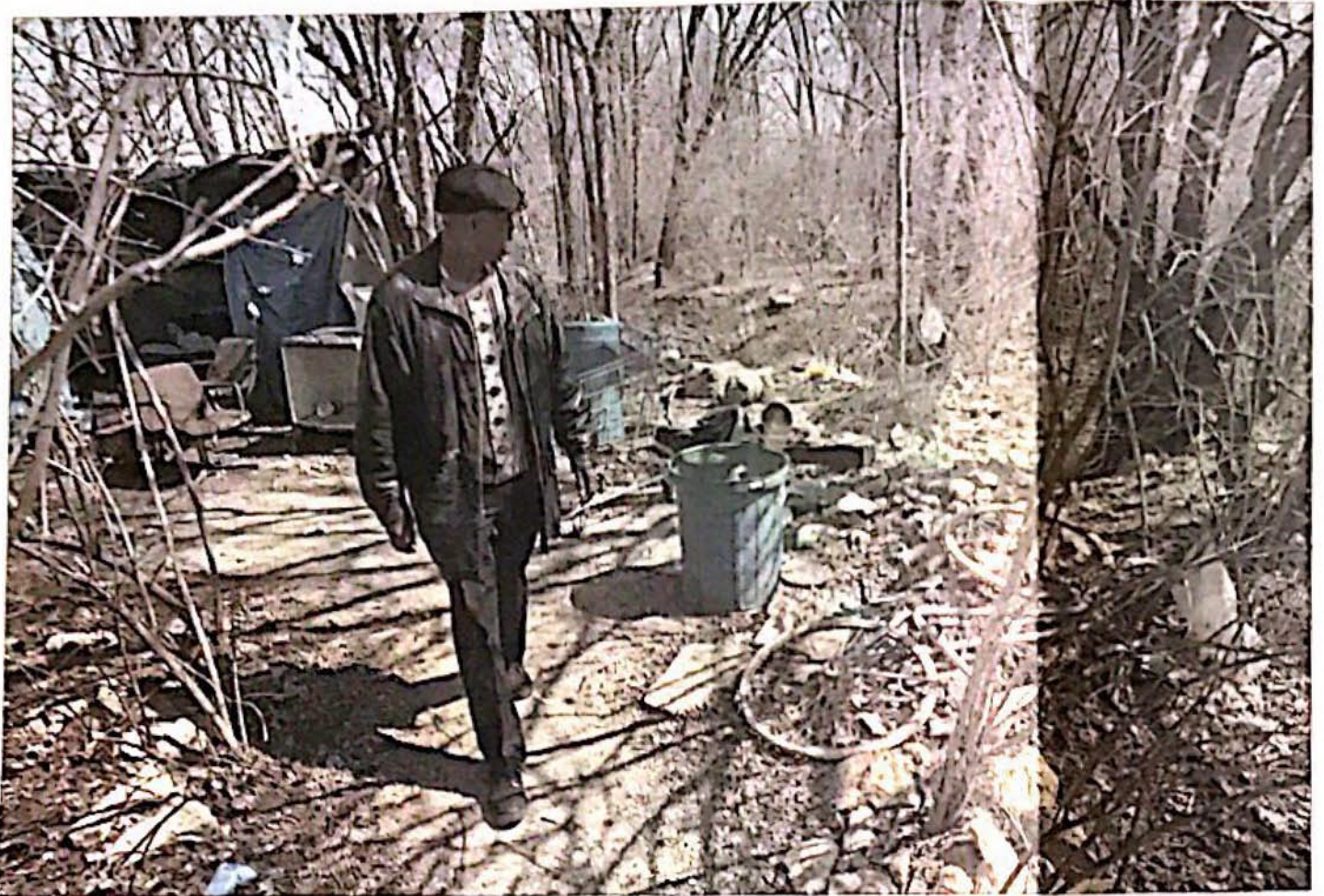
# CITY



## AN OFFERING OF HEALTH

Program provides medical care for the homeless Page 8





Photos by REED HOFFMANN, Special to The Star

About 70 percent of the time, Durant's job is to visit the homeless in their makeshift camps, such as this one near Third and Cherry streets. He is an outreach counselor for Swope Parkway Health Center, which runs the Healthcare for the Homeless Program. Durant has been visiting homeless people in Kansas City, such as the man at right, for the past six years. The man is one of seven people who have created a home under a bridge by hanging blankets and using a stove made from a metal barrel.

# An overture of health

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH  
The Kansas City Star

Tattered blankets flutter in the frigid wind, suspended by ropes just under a section of the Broadway bridge. Trash skitters into the ravine. A train roars nearby, drowning out the drone of passing cars.

"Hello," yells Qayyim Durant, an outreach counselor for Swope Parkway Health Center. He picks his way carefully through glass and concrete chunks toward a makeshift wall of scratches and heavy blankets.  
"Anybody here?"

The bright sunshine this day is deceptive. Temperatures hover near 35 degrees. Three people bundled in heavy coats, gloves and knit stocking caps step out from behind the blanket wall. They squint, then wave as recognition spreads on their faces.

They know Durant. And he knows them. These are the homeless. For the past six years, he's been visiting them under bridges throughout Kansas City in all kinds of weather, often bringing clean socks in the trunk of his car and checking to see if anybody needs to see a doctor. Some days he's here with his church passing out food.



Program offers medical care to people living on the street



Durant says he can tell if people are sick if they don't want to eat. For him, caring for the homeless is his calling.

Swope Parkway Health Center runs the Healthcare for the Homeless Program. More than 7,000 of the estimated 17,000 Kansas City homeless are helped every year by the agency, a one-stop outpatient clinic offering complete medical care.

The program began about 15 years ago, with the help of a federal grant. In addition to reaching the homeless on the streets, the center also sends its staff to 20 sites convenient to the homeless, such as Restart, 918 E. Ninth St., City Union Mission, 2301 Lexington Ave., and the Kansas City Rescue Mission, 1520 Cherry St., to name a few.

But for outreach counselors like Durant, 70 percent of their job is to visit the homeless in their makeshift camps.

"How ya doing?" Durant says, as he shakes hands all around. "Everybody feelin' OK?"

The two men and one woman nod yes, but an uncomfortable silence settles around the group. The homeless are leery of any strangers, especially if the strangers happen to be media.

"These folks are from *The Kansas City Star* and want to visit a homeless camp. Do you mind if we go in and look at your place?" Durant asked.

The men mumble something, lift up the corner of a blanket and move them back a bit.

The 30-by-20-foot room is dark. Almost cozy. A scavenger's paradise, it's furnished with others' castoffs, others' trash.

Sitting in one corner is a metal barrel glowing with a crackling fire. The barrel is turned on its side like a Franklin stove. An exhaust pipe with an elbow joint pipe routes smoke outside.

But ashy particles still float through the gaps in the makeshift blanket wall. A haze saturates everything and everyone with essence of burned wood pallet.

A beaten down shag rug, perhaps black, perhaps some other mottled color, is underfoot. The rug blocks the cold emanating from the concrete floor.

Overhead, a stretched wire holds a few extra clothes. A box of crackers and several cans of chili sit on a shelf created from an overhead bridge embankment. The room shudders slightly as a semi-trailer speeds on the highway above.

Seven beds are all made up, swathed in a hodgepodge of quilts and blankets. Seven people — five

men, two women — sleep here at night.

"I worked really hard on this place," says Rick, 39, who has lived under the bridge since October. "But things are turning around for me. Yessiree. I won't be here forever."

Durant thanks the group for the hospitality and directs his comments toward the woman, a 22-year-old named Diane. A shelter is a good place to stay when the weather gets warmer, he says. Women are especially at risk for crimes when temperatures rise, perhaps along with tempers. When talking with women, Durant always tries to discern in friendly conversation if they need to know about a battered women's shelter.

As an outreach counselor, he knows how to help the homeless navigate the system: where they can eat seven days a week, which churches offer showers twice a week, how to follow various job leads across the area.

And if Durant sees anyone with children, he lets them know right away that the street is no place for children.

"I tell them to go directly to the shelter by that night or the next morning, or the state will take their kids away because I'll turn them in myself," he says. "That's how strongly I feel about it."

On this day, he reminds everyone that the health center can do more than dispense medicine or provide emergency care; the center also provides routine medical check-ups, dental and optometry care, and medicines and therapies for the mentally ill.

"Most of the time all we ever need around here is ibuprofen," says Rick, shrugging his shoulders. "We get a lot of aches and pains."

Ibuprofen. Cold medicines. Heartburn tablets. Common medicines found in even the most mundane of medicine cabinets, but difficult for the homeless to get.

"The homeless must carry everything they own on their back," said Anita Louison, one of two certified

physician assistants who work with the homeless in the program. For 10 years, Louison has been seeing patients for Swope Parkway Health Center and the Healthcare for the Homeless Program.

Once a week, she sees patients for an hour at the Homeless Information Center on 11th and Cherry streets.



"These are the neediest of people and they're also the most thankful even when we give them the least bit of help," said Anita Louison, a physician's assistant at Swope Parkway Health Center. She checked a sore on Dorcus Hughes' lip at the Homeless Information Center at 11th and Cherry streets.

Here, there's always a pot of coffee brewing. A few dozen people waiting in the plastic blue chairs. Talk radio blaring from a nearby stereo. This is a place where the homeless can network about services.

By far the most requested medicine at every site is ibuprofen. Being homeless means walking, a lot. On a recent day, Louison saw four patients in a row all complaining of sore knees and other weather-related aches and pains.

There is an unending need for health care among the very poorest of Kansas Citians, she said. And now Louison is seeing homelessness reaching into the third and fourth generations of families.

"So many things can make someone homeless," she said with a sigh. "It's so easy for it to happen. Often, it begins with a devastating illness that wrecks a family's finances and sends them on a downward spiral of losing their jobs, and eventually their homes. Relatives might take them at first, but that welcome wears out fast."

"What makes me keep wanting to do my job? These are the neediest of people and they're also the most thankful even when we give them the least bit of help."

But that help is expensive, especially if a medical problem requires hypertension or diabetes medicines. Those drugs can easily run \$1,000 a month per patient, Louison said, despite the staff asking drug companies for discounts and dispensing generic medicines.

The health care program also works hard to get pregnant women into a prenatal program. Within the past few years, infant deaths among the homeless have decreased thanks to the Healthcare for the Homeless Program, Louison said.

Word is getting out. "We try to take every barrier out of the way by giving them a token for bus service, rewards for seeing the doctor regularly. And their delivery is free for them," Louison said. "The program is working. We're starting to see patients earlier in their pregnancies than just a few weeks before they deliver like we did before."

Two weeks ago, the Kansas City Council approved \$84,500 to Swope Parkway for the Center's service to the homeless. But Louison said it would probably be gone in a month — all spent on medicines. The annual budget the federal government allows the program is \$1.2 million. But even that is stretched thin.

"We try and do the best we can with what we've got. We could always do more, but at least we're doing this much."

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