

Housing as Health Care

Physicians in the emergency department of a hospital often have a patient who shows up in the ER 30 times in just one year with 15 of those visits ending up in hospitalization. Despite effective treatment at each visit, the patient continues to be sick.

This scenario becomes more complicated when the patient is unhoused, or lacks consistent housing, which means when they are discharged from the hospital, their health may continue to be at risk. Perhaps the patient has a substance-use disorder or a mental health condition, or both. These conditions can potentially complicate a patient's ability to fill a prescription, find follow-up care, and make other lifestyle changes that could promote better health.

In short, the patient has complex needs far beyond what an emergency department visit—and hospitalization—can meet. How do you offer truly effective care that addresses all the conditions affecting this person's health?

If you're Randy Jotte, MD, WashU Medicine emergency medicine specialist at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, you can evaluate your patient for eligibility to participate in a program called Hospital to Housing.

At its inception, Hospital to Housing was a joint project supported by Barnes-Jewish, BJC HealthCare, and St. Louis social services agency St. Patrick Center. The program employs a long-range, multi-pronged approach designed to help people with complex, interrelated needs find housing and achieve better health.

To be eligible for the Hospital to Housing program, an identified person must be unhoused or housing insecure, meaning they do not have consistent, safe, and reliable housing. They must also have substance-use disorder or mental illness.

From its pilot phase in 2019 to its current expansion phase, Hospital to Housing has helped more than 70 people. "In addition to monitoring the clinical and social services aspects of the program, Hospital to Housing staff pay close attention to the program's financial health, a factor that helps ensure its continuing success," explains Dr. Jotte.

Before joining the Hospital to Housing program, participants generated \$19,700 in hospital costs per patient per year. After joining the program, that annual per-patient cost dropped to \$7,200, for a savings of \$12,500 per patient per year.



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Emergency Medicine Specialist

