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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 7, 2019

19-030

Hawai'i Department of Health and Wahiawa General Hospital partner to develop short-term beds for mental health and substance abuse care

HONOLULU – The Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) and Wahiawa General Hospital (WGH) are partnering to provide short-term mental health “stabilization” beds in a hospital setting. The partnership leverages resources from both organizations to meet a growing need in the community and to support efforts to develop a more comprehensive behavioral health care system statewide. Currently in the development phase, the project anticipates providing as many as 30 beds for this purpose by next year.

“There is a high demand for these types of services and this collaboration with the Department of Health positions our hospital to be a part of that solution,” said Brian Cunningham, Wahiawa General Hospital chief executive officer.”

The beds will bridge a vital gap between emergency room (ER) care and longer-term treatment for individuals with mental health and substance abuse issues to help reduce repetitive ER visits and chronic homelessness. In the first quarter of this year, the Queen's Medical Center emergency departments at Punchbowl and West O'ahu had a total of 1,312 unique patients with at least three of more visits, including 270 (20 percent) who were identified as experiencing homelessness.

“By adding these treatment beds at Wahiawa, we will be able to accelerate our plans to address chronic homelessness statewide,” said Lt. Gov. Josh Green. “This is a critical part of the broader solution to end homelessness in Hawai'i, which includes permanent supportive housing for all, advanced help for the most seriously mentally ill on our streets, and all of the transitional steps in between. Healthcare and housing go hand in hand.”

The stabilization beds will provide a vital resource for community providers to place individuals who are chronically homeless and need short-term medical and psychiatric care as a steppingstone to longer-term care in the community. Within the past year, more than 300 individuals on O'ahu had more than one mental health emergency call and were transported to an ER but were not admitted for acute psychiatric hospitalization. This program will help to reduce that number.

“The partnership with Wahiawa General Hospital fills a critical gap in our current network of care,” said Scott Morishige, governor’s coordinator on homelessness. “Currently, there are few immediate options available for individuals struggling with severe mental illness or substance abuse. By adding new stabilization beds, this partnership will improve continuity of care and result in critical cost savings for our healthcare and homeless service systems.”

The hospital beds at Wahiawa General will be used for short-term stays, generally 15 days or less, at which point an individual could transition to a long-term residential program, if needed. It is anticipated that the project could provide services for up to 500 patients per year, saving millions of dollars from decreased repeat ER visits and other acute care services.

“This effort is the type of public-private partnership needed to effectively meet the demand for mental health and substance abuse services statewide,” said Eddie Mersereau, deputy director of the Hawai’i Department of Health’s Behavioral Health Administration. “Our goal with this and similar efforts underway is to create a more connected and coordinated continuum of care so that people can get the care they need when they need it.” Mersereau believes the project will add a “missing link” to the resources that currently exist to support some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

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