Medical Respite Care: Defining Characteristics

Medical respite care is acute and post-acute medical care for people experiencing homelessness who are too ill or frail to recover from a physical illness or injury on the streets, but who are not ill enough to be in a hospital. These programs provide short-term residential services (often in a shelter or transitional program) coupled with support services and access to medical care.¹

Common characteristics of these programs include the following:

- Closes the gap between hospitals/emergency rooms and homeless shelters that do not have the capacity to provide medical and support services.
- Provides a low-cost, high-quality, and innovative discharge option to aid emergency room diversion and hospital discharge options.
- Serves as an integral component of the Continuum of Care (CoC) for homeless services in any community.
- Provides participants the opportunity to access medical and supportive services needed to assist their recuperation.
- Allows a length of stay determined by medical need and progress on an individual treatment level.
- Provides continuity of care when clients are transitioning between hospital and home.
- Engages participants in the process of their recuperation and discharge planning.
- Allows a flexible service delivery model that reflects unique community needs, priorities, and resources.
- Shows respect for human dignity by preventing unsafe and illegal discharges to the streets or shelters.

Terminology: The term “medical respite care” may also be known as “recuperative care” in some health care systems. These terms are synonymous.

Medical Respite Care: Provides acute & post-acute medical care for people who are homeless and too ill to be on the street/in shelter, but not ill enough for hospital level care.

Shortens hospital lengths of stay, reduces readmissions, improves outcomes, lowers cost.²

Differs from “caregiver respite,” skilled nursing facilities, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, hospice care, and supportive housing programs.
Further Resources on Medical Respite Care

1. Standards for Medical Respite Care
2. Medical Respite/Recuperative Care Literature Review
3. Medical Respite/Recuperative Care Program Directory
4. Respite Care Providers’ Network
5. Tool Kit (research, template contracts, planning materials, etc.)
6. Policy brief: Medical Respite Care: Financing Approaches
7. Policy brief: Medical Respite Care Programs & the IPH Triple Aim Framework
8. White paper: Medicaid & Managed Care: Financing Approaches for Medical Respite Care
9. Technical Assistance Requests