

New East Orange housing gives hope to homeless hospital patients

By Halley Bondy/For The Star-Ledger

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EAST ORANGE -- East Orange General Hospital opened a new facility today to house a couple of dozen homeless patients as it helps them transition to a life off the streets and into a home of their own.

The hospital unveiled a \$6 million housing complex, located in a previously vacant wing next to its ambulance hub on South Munn Street. The 24-room facility, called Hope Gardens, will house homeless adults in Essex County who suffer from any form of mental illness, including depression, addiction, schizophrenia and other issues, according to hospital spokeswoman Ilam Shah.



Alexandra Pais/New Jersey Local News Service

Ruth Parramore, gives a tour of one of the apartments during the grand opening of Hope Gardens, a housing facility for homeless adults with behavioral health issues at East Orange Hospital.

"We realized there was a gap in our services in that we had no housing," said the hospital's chief executive officer Kevin Slavin, who said the hospital served almost 1,400 homeless people with behavioral problems last year.

Hope Gardens boasts furnished studio apartments complete with large bathrooms and kitchens, where residents will do their own cooking. The building provides a laundry room, lounges and an outdoor courtyard. Residents will work with case managers and hospital staff who will help them transition into traditional housing.

Ruth Parramore, 52, will be among the first residents at Hope Gardens. At the today's opening ceremony, she said that as a child in Newark, she endured physical abuse at the hands of a family member. The next decades of her life were consumed by heavy drinking, drugs and homelessness. Parramore checked herself into East Orange General Hospital 16 years ago for detox and psychological help and has returned to the hospital repeatedly for medication, therapy and housing assistance.

"I came to this program not only financially broke, but emotionally broke," said Parramore, now seven years sober. "[The hospital] gave me a new foundation on which to begin life again."

State Sen. Richard Codey (D-Essex), was at the grand opening today, congratulating the hospital for the project, which was in the making for more than a year.

"I can't tell you how many times I hear about someone trying to get housing, but the list is too long," Codey said to the hospital's administration. "The county lost six hospitals in the last decade. You are on an island to yourself, and we need you."

Hope Gardens, funded by state and federal grants, costs between \$0 and \$250 total for residents, depending on their income. Shah said that all the facility's rooms are currently occupied.

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