Gimme Shelter

Sustainable housing is a must for sick people to get and stay healthy.

December 3, 2015 By Kate Ferguson

When Brenda Owens (not her real name) feels a tingle on her upper thigh during the day, she knows what's coming. By the next morning, she can count on finding the beginning of a raw, open wound that looks like someone pressed a lit cigarette into her flesh. Owens has lupus and lives in dread of the autoimmune disease's unpredictable flare-ups that precipitated her plunge into recurring periods of homelessness that she continues to battle.

Two years ago, Owens got very sick. Frequent hospitalizations caused her to lose several jobs. Without a regular income to pay her bills, she was evicted. The domino effect followed, swift and hard. "I had no health insurance," Owens says. "Health workers got me on Medicaid. But I'd be on Medicaid for six months, and then for the next six months I wouldn't have any health care. At the ER, they'd give me meds to hold me for several days until I got to a doctor. But you can't get to see a doctor without insurance."

Like Owens, many homeless people lack access to basic health care services, food, shelter, a way to communicate and means of transportation.
When she's homeless, Owens's health suffers. Without money to buy nourishing foods, she eats cheap, unhealthy meals from fast food restaurants that wreak havoc on her health. One day her blood pressure shot up. She passed out in the train station, and paramedics rushed her to the hospital. "It was scary," she says.

Currently, Owens is unable to hold a job because of her chronic illness. She's had to rely on charity from family and friends for a place to stay while she negotiates the lengthy process to secure Social Security disability benefits. In the meantime, her treatment plan consists of her "getting sick and going back to the emergency room and letting them give me more medication," she says.

"Ultimately, the loss of housing combined with poor health, no income, and limited personal support leads to homelessness," confirms the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, a network of more than 10,000 doctors, nurses, social workers, patients and advocates whose mission is to eliminate homelessness.

Meanwhile, Owens's troubles continue to multiply. Her mental health is also under siege. Doctors diagnosed her with depression, and she's on meds to lift her mood. She admits she has dark days,

but so far she’s been able to remain upbeat.

“I’m hopeful that something’s going to work,” she says. “Because of the lupus, there’s a lot of things I can’t do anymore, so I’m trying to reinvent myself in other areas.”

Now, if she could just get permanent housing in a place to call her own.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/sustainable-housing-28126-1611