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Funds for sobering center/S.F., hospitals paying to ease drunk load in ERs
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Frustrated with chronic homeless alcoholics who sleep it off in San Francisco's emergency room beds, private hospitals will donate \$400,000 so the city can create a safe place for drunks to sober up, hospital and city officials announced Thursday.

The San Francisco Health Department, which runs the city's largest emergency room at San Francisco General Hospital, will pay another \$400,000 to start the new program in a Tenderloin clinic this spring.

The one-year pilot program is the result of a study by a City Hall task force that found that the number of hours that overcrowded emergency rooms must divert ambulances to other hospitals has grown tenfold in five years.

Nearly a third of the ambulances arriving at city hospitals were transporting chronic public alcoholics to the emergency room, the study found. And while an average patient spent about 3.5 hours in an emergency room, an intoxicated patient stayed six hours.

"One out of five of our patients on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday is a public inebriate," said Cheryl Fama, president of St. Francis Hospital, which donated \$50,000 to the sobering center.

Chinese Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, St. Luke's Hospital, UCSF and Catholic Health Care West also donated funds to the sobering center.

Supervisor Gavin Newsom, one of the city officials who requested the task force study, called the situation a health care crisis during a press conference Thursday.

"It's reducing the likelihood that you or your family can access emergency health care," said Newsom, who is running for mayor this fall.

The sobering center will be located in the existing 28-bed McMillian Center, the city's only walk-in clinic where homeless inebriates can sleep it off on a green mat, grab a snack and see a social worker.

For the pilot program, McMillian will add medical staff and be available to ambulances 24 hours a day so paramedics can drop off inebriates who have no other medical emergency. No date has been set for the opening.

The sobering center is one of the only new initiatives being funded this year by the Health Department, which is struggling to cut \$70 million -- including programs for the homeless and mentally ill -- to help the city erase a potential \$350 million deficit.

Mitch Katz, the city's public health chief, estimates that the city's \$400,000 investment in a sobering center will save San Francisco General

Hospital \$200,000 by freeing up emergency room beds now taken up for hours by chronic inebriates so the hospital can serve more patients who move through the system more quickly.

The sobering center is a small start to solving two major health care dilemmas hitting most urban areas: how to help chronic public drunks and how to unclog emergency rooms.

Newsom said the city is studying other ways to improve the city's emergency system, including creating a 311 phone number that the public can call for nonemergencies. To deal with public inebriates, he also is looking at programs where other cities have asked liquor stores and markets to restrict alcohol sales in heavily impacted neighborhoods.