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Home Away From Home

A Friendly Face

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As St. Louis grows in its reputation of providing state-of-the-art medical care by renowned doctors, more and more people venture here for treatment from around the country and across the world. For those patients and families, these local organizations provide a home away from home.

Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC)

The number '3' has special meaning for the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Metro St. Louis. Marking its 30th anniversary in 2011, the local division boasts three locations that provide relief for families of seriously ill or injured children, including the newest one on the campus of Mercy Children's Hospital, the 300th Ronald McDonald House in the world. "We're also really proud that we've served more than 300 families in the past year just at that house," adds RMHC spokesperson **Katie Underhill**.

Ronald McDonald Houses provide lodging, a hot meal and other comforts of home for up to 59 families who come to St. Louis from at least 50 miles away for their child's medical treatment. While families are asked to pay \$5 a night, no one is turned away if they cannot afford it. "Having a sick child is one of the most difficult situations a family can face, so being able to stay close to that child and not have to spend all their money on lodging is so important," Underhill says.

In addition, three Ronald McDonald Family Rooms are located within the hospitals that the houses are in proximity to: Mercy, St. Louis Children's Hospital and SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center. With showers, laundry facilities, snacks and television, the rooms provide "an oasis in the middle of the hospital for 80 out-of-town and local families every day," Underhill explains.

Families come to the St. Louis Ronald McDonald Houses from all over the country and world, and their stays range from a couple nights to almost a year. "Children are going to heal more quickly if their parents are around and they are comfortable in their environment," Underhill says. "We're so happy to be able to provide them with a way to stay together."



A father and daughter helped by Ronald McDonald House Charities

American Cancer Society Hope Lodge

They would drive for three hours, five days a week, to get to St. Louis for their treatment, then sleep in their car, eat fast food, and seldom find a hot shower or laundry facilities. These are the horror stories

C. June Shinnors has heard from out-of-town cancer patients before they discovered the American Cancer Society Hope Lodge. "We're told all the time, If this place wasn't here, I don't know what I'd do," says Shinnors, director of the St. Louis location. "We want to ease their suffering and their financial burden."

The 45-room hospitality house, which opened in 1995, is one of 31 Hope Lodges across the country. Cancer patients traveling to St. Louis for medical care can stay with a caregiver for the duration of their treatment, where kitchens, laundry rooms, common areas and a full-time staff and volunteers create a semblance of the home they are missing. In addition to the lodging, the Central West End campus provides access to other American Cancer Society services, like free wigs, nutritional supplements and a wealth of information.

A patient's stay is free of charge, which is especially important for the 60 percent of guests who are below the poverty line. The Hope

Lodge staff stays current with the newest types of cancer treatments, in order to best meet their guests' needs, but often the most vital element is the emotional support they receive from other patients. "When people get to Hope Lodge, they realize that they can create a support group amongst themselves, right there in the kitchen, living room and dining room," Shinners says.

While the Hope Lodge has helped more than 26,000 patients and caregivers since it opened 16 years ago, Shinners hopes to improve the facilities and serve even more people through a soon-to-be-launched capital campaign. "We can measure our impact by dollars and numbers, but the notes, hugs and testimonials we receive every day are the best measure of what really happens here."

HavenHouse St. Louis

Twenty-four hours a day, HavenHouse St. Louis is ready to welcome families through its doors and relieve their worries. "We want to make sure there's nothing else they have to concentrate on other than their own health or a family member's wellness," says executive director **Kathy Sindel**.

With a 32-bedroom, 25,000-square-foot facility, HavenHouse provides an all-encompassing package of lodging, meals and transportation to its guests of all ages and cases. The organization has served more than 42,000 people in less than eight years, including 42 percent from rural Missouri. "We increase the opportunity to seek the best medical care possible, especially for people in rural towns who face many barriers," Sindel says. "It's lifesaving in many ways."

From Georgia, the full-time cook who makes home-cooked meals every day, to long-time volunteers, families who return year after year for treatment will find familiar faces. "They're not strangers when they come here. It feels like home," Sindel explains.

HavenHouse serves 19 different hospitals and medical facilities in the area, and doctors often refer particular cases, like transplants, to the facility because of the specialized services they are able to provide. While the nightly fee ranges from \$30 to \$40, a grant has helped to eliminate the cost for long-term families, and Sindel hopes that the more recognition and financial support the organization garners, the lower the charge will become.

Each year, the hospitality house has had a 10 to 12 percent increase in the number of families it has served, as the St. Louis health care industry continues to grow. "People often say to us, We aren't sure we would have sought out the medical treatment we so desperately needed if it wasn't for HavenHouse," Sindel notes. "We just want to meet that need."

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