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Work starts on casitas to house transplant patients

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NORTHEAST VALLEY - Workers recently broke ground on a multimillion-dollar facility that will dramatically expand the number of Mayo Clinic transplant patients able to receive affordable room and board throughout their medical treatment.

The Arizona Transplant House Foundation, the Mayo Clinic and the Arizona Cancer Society have formed a partnership to build the Village at Mayo Clinic, 5777 E. Mayo Blvd., on the Mayo Clinic's Phoenix campus.

The first four of the Village's nine casitas are expected to open by next summer. The casitas will house patients, caregivers and any family members who wish to stay.

Until the Village opens, transplant patients will continue to stay at the Arizona Transplant House at Brusally Ranch in Scottsdale, a ranch house that was converted in 1999 into a facility unique in its sole dedication to provide comfort to transplant patients.

"We're the only hospitality house (in the nation) that strictly supports solid organ transplant and bone marrow transplant patients," said Dana Cummings, house manager for the Arizona Transplant House.

Once completed, the approximately 45,000-square-foot Village at Mayo Clinic will be about 10 times larger than the Brusally Ranch facility, and it will be able to host at least 1,000 more patients each year.

The transplant house now welcomes about 2,500 patients a year. The average stay is six to eight weeks, and the house can host a maximum of 16 to 18 patients at a time.

In less than a decade, patient demand for accommodations has outstripped the transplant house's ability to provide them, forcing the facility to turn away hundreds of patients every year and spurring the effort to build the Village.

"We've outgrown the Arizona Transplant House," said Lynn Closway, a board member of Arizona Transplant House Foundation, a non-profit organization that runs the house.

"The new Village will try to capture some of the spirit of the transplant house and keep its beauty, but it will give us more room to house our patients so they don't have to stay at a hotel."

Not all of the patients at the new facility will be there because of transplants. The Arizona Cancer Society is contributing to the project and will receive several of its casitas for the purpose of housing cancer patients near the Mayo Clinic.

The transplant house is often the only affordable option for patients and families who need to remain in town for extended periods of time near the Mayo Clinic for what often is life-saving treatment.

The house asks for a donation of \$25 per day and a one-time \$25 cleaning fee, a price less than the market rate for hotels and motels. Patients unable to afford that amount are allowed to stay anyway. Prices will remain the same for the new facility.

Travis Speck, who is recovering from surgery to remove a brain tumor and awaiting a stem-cell transplant, said that staying at the transplant house is helping him get through a difficult time. It has spared the 22-year-old Parker resident the boredom of a hotel room and enabled him

to establish friendships with other patients who can identify with what he is enduring.

"You get to talk to them, hear their stories and see what's going on with them," Speck said. "It's a better experience than a hotel."

Financing the Village at Mayo Clinic will be done primarily through fundraising efforts. Proceeds from the sale of the Brusally Ranch property to a real estate investment company last year also will be poured into the project.

"We will get it done," Cummings said. "It might take five years to fully build it out, but it will happen. There are so many patients that need help with these long-term stays."

Information: 480-609-1324, or visit www.aztransplanthouse.org or www.mayoclinic.org

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2008/07/28/20080728sr-phx-mayo0729.html>