

Caring for cancer survivors

Organization helps low-income women deal with aftereffects.

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The women who gather at the SLEW Wellness Center are survivors.

Months, sometimes years, before arriving here, they faced a cancer diagnosis, treatment, surgery and the emotional havoc those events bring. Making things worse, they are uninsured or underinsured and low-income.

They're dealing with the consequences of cancer that don't get the ink that diagnosis and treatment do. Facing heart failure and rheumatoid arthritis, among other ailments, they seek emotional and physical aftercare that they can't afford.

Here, in a quaint series of tiny offices in an aging building on Nacogdoches Road, they get relaxation massages, psychological counseling and occupational therapy. Also available is lymphatic drainage therapy, which treats swelling that occurs when lymph nodes are blocked or removed.

They also can get compression garments, which help constrict an area to prevent accumulation of fluids, as well as wigs, prostheses or special bras. Some get emergency food and utility aid.

But like so many other nonprofits, SLEW — Support Lending for Emotional Well-being — needs funds. At the moment, the seven-year-old agency needs more room for an exercise program shelved because of space constraints.

"We're in tremendous need of a larger space," said Olga Young, founder and executive director and a survivor of breast cancer.

The agency started at the former Windsor Park Mall, where it had 4,500



PHOTOS BY JERRY LARA/glara@express-news.net

Barbara Rice gets a massage from therapist Sarah Kennedy at the SLEW Wellness Center.

Psychotherapist Diane Boudreaux-Kraft comforts client Kim Houston during a session last week. SLEW provides free support services for uninsured, underinsured and low-income women affected by cancer.



How to Help

SLEW WELLNESS CENTER

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Center needs a large space and monetary donations for aftercare, including food baskets and utility assistance.



square feet. It now has 2,500.

If someone has a 4,000- to 6,000-square-foot space SLEW can rent at a modest price, Young said, "They can use it as a tax write-off."

SLEW also needs cash to buy wigs, bras and prostheses. A breast prosthesis can cost \$300; a bra, \$75; and a wig, \$50 — all costs that are prohibitive to clients, Young said.

The center also keeps an emergency clothes closet for those in abusive homes.

"(Some) have been put out by their husbands" because of their conditions, Young said.

Eighty-five percent of the women SLEW helps are recovering from breast cancer; the other 15 per-

cent from lung, cervical, ovarian or other cancers; 57 percent are Hispanic.

They face multiple issues, said Diane Boudreaux-Kraft, a psychologist who counsels clients.

"Obviously, the cancer is a major issue in most of the women's lives, whether it's a new diagnosis or a recurrence.

"Even though we look like we're OK, there are so many things that happen afterward. The treatment saves our lives, but so many times they also leave these side effects we have to deal with the rest of our lives," including pain and financial drain.

A letter written by a client in a writing workshop expresses the latter.

"Dear Money," it begins. "I hate you! The fact

that we need to have you in order for us to survive in this world makes me sick."

Many clients also deal with depression and anxiety.

"It's not just the cancer," said survivor Kim Houston, breaking into tears before a counseling session.

The center's \$500,000 annual budget includes \$200,000 in in-kind contributions, mostly time from counselors and therapists.

"I recommend them," said Laura Martinez, 52, a survivor.

Good word-of-mouth travels fast.

Every month, the center sees more than 500 clients who get one or more services. Each year, 100 new ones arrive.