

# Five in five days: Florida hospitals are dumping patients at Lakeland homeless shelter

LAKELAND — Lakeland officials, who have proverbially spoken about [homeless](#) individuals being bused into the city and left behind, should keep a closer eye on Uber or Lyft passengers.

Talbot House Ministries has seen a significant increase in mental health patients dropped off at the nonprofit's North Kentucky Avenue shelter, usually by a rideshare service. The men and women often arrive in a hospital gown and slippers, confused about where they are, according to Deborah Cozzetti, Talbot House's director of programs.

"We are a shelter. We have a program, but we can't [provide this level of](#)

[care](#) — it's not who we are," Cozzetti said.

Cozzetti, who's worked at the nonprofit for more than six years, said in the past there would be one or two cases a month, usually coming from [Polk County facilities](#) in Lakeland or Winter Haven.

In recent months, Cozzetti said it's become two or three hospital patients a week on the doorstep of the shelter, often coming from as far away as Hernando, Pasco and Pinellas counties. Since Feb. 2, Talbot House has received five individuals this way — six, if you count a woman who is six months pregnant.

One man was dropped off at shelter while The Ledger was there Tuesday afternoon. The individual's medical paperwork listed "Talbot House shelter" as his discharge address and instructed him to contact the shelter's clinician in case of an emergency.

"They tell people, 'Talbot House has a bed for you,'" Cozzetti said. "They don't mention that we are not a medical facility or anything like that."

The nonprofit organization has about 75 overnight beds for its residency program and opens its emergency shelter to 100 to 120 individuals each night, who stay in a shared living quarters. The shelter is currently operating at 140% of its capacity, she said.

Talbot House does not have any medical beds or private rooms. Individuals arriving with prescriptions for psychiatric medications can't get them immediately filled, as there's no pharmacy on site. There's one licensed mental health counselor, Cozzetti said, who is there to provide counseling and therapy for residents as they try to cope with trauma and stress of getting their life together.

"We are not a mental-health facility," she said.

[Lakeland Police Department's](#) Neighborhood Liaison Unit recently became aware of the patient-dumping issues happening at Talbot House, LPD spokeswoman Stephanie Kerr wrote in an email to The Ledger.

"We are currently in the fact-finding stage to learn more about the scope of the issue," Kerr said.

Lakeland Police Department does not have numbers on how many individuals may have been dumped at Talbot House or within the Lakeland area from health care facilities outside Polk County. It has worked with the nonprofit to establish a protocol to collect as much information as information.

Lakeland Regional Health is "required to have a safe discharge plan" for any patient who is Baker Acted at its medical center then discharged from care, according to Deana Nelson, LRH's senior vice president of administration and corporate policies. This may include a shelter or other facility if that's where the individual has been living, or if coordinated with the agency prior to discharge.

**Worth and Purpose:** [Couple's Lakeland ministry evolves from cash giveaway videos to sustained support](#)

For now, Cozzetti said Talbot House attempts to offer what it can to patients on its doorstep. For many, their first request is a shower or a bed to sleep in. The nonprofit has partnered with Huntington Pharmacy to get prescription medications filled. Recently discharged patients are set up with a bed or cot to sleep in the dining area so they can be observed overnight, separate from the overnight population in case of

any behavioral issues, she said.

Only about 20% of the individuals who are being dumped at the shelter fit into one of its programs, Cozzetti said. Individuals who have significant physical or mental health issues and require ongoing assistance or older teens and pregnant women are among those Talbot House works to find another shelter or safe haven for.

"The burden is on us," she said. "We try to send them back to a hospital, and we need to send them back saying, 'Please don't send them back here.' They are going to fail mentally or physically here, as we are not equipped to take care of them."

*Sara-Megan Walsh can be reached at [swalsh@theledger.com](mailto:swalsh@theledger.com) or [863-802-7545](tel:863-802-7545). Follow on X @SaraWalshFl.*