

Is Street Medicine Effective in Improving Access to Healthcare?

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INTRODUCTION

Street medicine is a program where medical teams go out into the community so that disadvantaged populations have health care more easily available (Street Medicine, 2018).

Being homeless exposes people to an array of health problems, as well as prone to substance abuse which as caused a stereotype of those who are homeless (Singer, 2003).

The homeless population is described as being sicker than the general population, while having limited access to healthcare to improve their health (Singer, 2003).

Barriers in accessing health care can include difficulty contacting health services, physical access to health facilities, medication security, the affordability of health care as well as perceptions of being judged while accessing care (Davies & Wood, 2018).

The key points of improving access to health care for the homeless incorporate access to stable housing, continuity of care, hospital outreach, coordinated care and medical recovery centers (Davies & Wood, 2018).

Street Medicine has three components to it: Clinics, soup kitchens & shelters. The street team, that goes into the woods and other places where the homeless reside, bringing medications and supplies with them. As well as Hospital-based consult services ("Close to Home", 2017)

In 2018, the U.S. census reported that 8.5% of the countries entire population did not have health insurance (Berchick, Barnett, & Upton 2019).

SIGNIFICANCE

In 2019, specifically in Pennsylvania, there were 13,199 people experiencing homelessness ("United States Interagency", 2019).

According to the Centers for Disease Control, as of 2019 being homeless puts those at increased risk for chronic and infectious illnesses, substance abuse and poor mental heath (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2019).

The life expectancy of someone experiencing homelessness is around 50 years of age, much less then those who are housed by almost 20 years ("National Coalition", 2018)

POSITION STATEMENT

Street Medicine is effective in increasing access to healthcare and will improve the lives of those who normally would struggle. Having a program that directly delivers health care to the homeless, assists with housing and management of care eliminates barriers and improves the health status of these homeless patients.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

Lehigh Valley Health Network's (LVHN) Street Medicine program cares for 1500 unique patients a year ("Close to Home", 2017).

At Lehigh Valley Cedar Crest Hospital 5% of patients are homeless, as well as 6% at LVHN Muhlenberg and 16% of patients at LVHN 17th Street Hospital (LVHN, 2020)

Street Medicine Lehigh Valley provides services at 7 clinical sites, all in soup kitchens and shelters. Street medicine works with other local organizations to provide services and care needed to address patient needs such as: Allentown Rescue Mission, New Bethany Ministries, Trinity Episcopal Church, Valley Youth House, Safe Harbor Easton, St. Paul's Lutheran and Lehigh Valley Health Network hospitals. With these resources, food and shelter can be provided to patients who need it most ("Close to Home", 2017).

Anyone experiencing homelessness in the Lehigh valet is eligible to receive Street Medicine services. Through Street Medicine, all care provided through the program with the inclusion of medication, laboratory tests & studies are free to these patients (LVHN, 2020).



Lehigh Valley Health Network News. (2020).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

For Nursing Practice:

The shelters partnered with Street Medicine can help with people who need a safe place to stay and recover from medical issues when they cannot be outside ("Close to Home", 2017).

Homeless patients who come to Lehigh Valley hospitals through the Street Medicine program do not have to worry about payment for treatment, because it is covered (LVHN, 2020).

Care is given on a scheduled rotation throughout the Lehigh Valley at 7 soup kitchens and homeless shelters weekly, this can help with follow-up care ("Close to Home", 2017).

In-patient consults can be done in Lehigh Valley hospitals to create the relationship between Street Medicine and the patient (LVHN, 2020).

Meeting the patient where they are creates a sense of respect and recognition for the patient, as well as making it more likely that the patient will collaborate with the care team (Withers, 2011)

Having a Street Medicine consult service allows hospitals to provide care and discharge plans that are reality based (Withers, 2011).



Street Medicine Institute. (2020).



Street Medicine Institute. (2020).

CONCLUSION

Street Medicine is effective in making health care more accessible to underserved populations. This is done through the use of a street medicine team, collaboration with soup kitchens and shelters, as well as hospital-based consult services. With the street team meeting patients where they are in the woods or under bridges, having access to meals and a bed when they need it most, and collaborating care with hospitals is essential to effective care management with these patients. Using Street Medicine, those who would normally not seek medical care can have the choice and the means to address their medical needs more easily than before.

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