Healthcare and Substance Abuse Treatment for the Homeless

PHC Clerkship: Healthcare for the Homeless

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Clerkship Goal

To understand the causes and consequences of homelessness, including the complex relationship between housing insecurity, health, and substance abuse, and to learn about the resources in the community for affected populations.

Population of Focus

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines four broad categories of homelessness:1
- Individuals and families who are living in a place not meant for human habitation (including an emergency shelter) or are exiting an institution where they resided for 90 days or less.
- Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence.
- Families with children or unaccompanied youth who are unstably housed and likely to continue in that state.
- People who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous conditions.

Community Healthlink

Community Healthlink (CHL) provides prevention, treatment, and recovery programs addressing mental health, addiction, and homelessness for adults, children, and families in Central Massachusetts.

- Homeless Outreach and Advocacy Program (HOAP) offers comprehensive services to the region’s homeless, including screenings, assessments, counseling, healthcare, rehabilitation, case management, and referral to support systems.
- Tenancy Preservation Program (TPP) provides transitional housing and legal housing support. TPP works with the Housing Court on behalf of individuals whose tenancy problems are related to mental or physical disabilities. CHL is a member of the UMass Memorial Health Care and is the largest not-for-profit health care system in Massachusetts.2

Healthlessness & Substance Abuse in Worcester

- According to the HUD Point in Time Count Results homelessness is on the rise in Worcester. From 2013 to 2014 the number of homeless people rose 8% - from 1,657 to 1,796. Additionally since 2011 homelessness in Worcester has risen 37%.
- There are about 3,300 families currently in the state’s Emergency Shelter units.

Homelessness as a Housing Crisis

The Housing First Philosophy: The primary need of homeless persons is permanent, stable housing, before other concerns can be addressed. Stable housing is defined as tenancy in a single room occupancy or household, not in shelters or transitional housing.4

Service Projects

- Assisted Nurse Practitioner and RNs at St. John’s soup kitchen with triaging and directing clients toward desired medical care. Our goal of outreach within the soup kitchen was to engage with people and create awareness about the services available to them.
- We immersed ourselves in Worcester community to experience the various economical and social determinants of homelessness and substance abuse.
- A video was produced with the goal of educating the UMass community about the homeless population and the challenges they face. This video also served the purpose of allowing us to express our feelings and experiences regarding our work with the homeless population.

Lessons learned & outcomes

Homelessness is a complex issue. It is the result of many social, individual, and environmental factors. Housing is the first priority in tackling this issue.

Trust is key. CHL’s Homeless Outreach Advocacy Program (HOAP) provides services to the population of focus that are free of judgement. As a result of creating a safe environment and a strong rapport, clients are more likely to attend regular appointments and seek multiple levels of care.

“Right to Shelter”: MA is the only state that makes it a law to guarantee eligible needy families a roof over their heads. Families with children can be placed in motels in shortage of alternative housing.

Community Resources

Important community resources for these patient populations include primary and mental health care, substance abuse treatment, housing services, social and legal services, job placement, and advocacy.

- Homeless Outreach and Advocacy Program and Community Healthlink
- St. John’s Soup Kitchen and Mustard Seed
- 25 Queen Street Shelter
- Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance (CMHA)
- Thayer Detox, PASSages, TSS
- Transitional Housing: Dismas, Beryl, Oasis, Spencer, Safe Haven, Hector Reyes

References

2. UMass Memorial Community Healthlink: http://www.communityhealthlink.org/chl/.
3. The Housing First Project. 2014. “Housing First: An Interview with Dr. Hugh Silk.”
6.中华人民共和国住房和城乡建设部. 2014. “国家住房保障制度建设年。”

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