Hospital-Community Partnerships: Supporting Women at a New Jersey Shelter

ABSTRACT

- Targeted community based interventions may improve the lifestyles of disadvantaged women and populations overall. The focus of this student-run community based initiative was to create a comprehensive curriculum in a homeless women’s shelter to help residents develop skills that would be useful in their transition to independent living. A secondary goal of this initiative was to build relationships between institutions that would outline individual student involvement and continue to benefit the institutions’ shared population.

BACKGROUND

- Homelessness is prevalent in the United States, with over 600,000 people living without permanent shelter on any given night. 25% of these homeless individuals are children living in families. This statistic suggests that homelessness is a widespread public health issue. Despite that, healthcare providers may not always be fully informed of the living arrangements of their patients. Unstable housing exposes individuals to the vulnerabilities of having to choose between nutrition, shelter, healthcare, education, and other factors crucial to stability and wellness. Homelessness in America is widespread and it is not always apparent.

- This community-based project was based out of Paterson, New Jersey, the second most densely populated city in the U.S., second to New York City. The median household income in 2014 was $33,964 and 28.4% of the population was living in poverty as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, although many more may be classified as the working poor.

- The site out of which this project was based is the Hilltop Haven Women’s Shelter. It is managed by the Paterson Task Force, a non-profit agency that also oversees a co-ed shelter a few minutes from this site.

- The participants of the weekend workshops were the women and children who live at the women’s shelter as well as the families who live in the apartment-style shelter a short distance away. The workshops were held at either shelter and the participants were told ahead of time when the workshops were scheduled.

OBJECTIVES

- Strengthen partnership between St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center and homeless shelters run by Paterson Task Force
- Expand comprehensive curriculum focused on preparing women for independent living
- Establish framework for program to be replicated and sustained with assistance from hospital and/or medical school volunteers

METHODS

- This program was envisioned as a weekend workshop series to assist women in their development and transition to independent living from a women’s shelter.
- The curriculum was developed to fill in the gaps and meet a need that was not yet fulfilled by the existing infrastructure. The shelter administration recognized that the women could use additional guidance and welcomed the implementation of a community-based intervention.
- The curriculum was planned around themes of health and self-development. An effort was made to select diverse topics that were not already being addressed in depth. In addition, other teams from the local hospital were invited to share their expertise on subjects that would be relevant to the residents of the shelter.
- Workshops were held at one of two shelters in Paterson, NJ on either Saturday or Sunday mornings. The sessions were scheduled weeks in advance and the women residing at the shelters were required to attend if they did not have work commitments. Educational material was provided for later reference.

RESULTS

- During year 1, the energy was focused on relationship building with the community agencies, planning and implementing the intervention.
- During year 2, the focus was on maintaining the relationship between St. Joseph’s hospital, refining the curriculum and expanding the impact with other partnerships and projects.
- A formal evaluation method was put in place to assess the outcomes of the initiative on a per workshop basis, via a survey tool. The survey tool evaluated the effectiveness of the speaker, the interest in the topic, and sought input on topics for future sessions.
- The program has been well-received thus far. The hospital and shelter are invested in the success of the partnership, therefore the sustainability of this program is promising.
- Now that the relationship between Hilltop Haven, Hilltop Heights, and St. Joseph’s hospital is well-established, the plan is to continue to hold weekend health information workshops.
- As before, the Community Affairs department will seek volunteers from various departments at St. Joseph’s hospital. This will ensure that guest speakers are interested in the topic at hand and that they are experts in that field, able to answer questions and respond to concerns of the shelter residents.
- An exciting addition to this partnership during this period was the addition of an initiative geared towards reducing asthma risk among the youth living at the shelter. This project emerged from a referral from the Community Affairs department at St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center to Hilltop Haven. Because the existing relationship has been fruitful, the Community Affairs department was enthusiastic about launching other projects. Hospital staff have volunteered to help with this project as well.

CONCLUSIONS

- Homelessness and poverty are intimately intertwined and continue to pose barriers to health, education, nutrition, and overall stability.
- The setting of transitional housing can be a pivotal place to promote healthy behaviors and a pattern of self-awareness and personal growth.
- These housing programs may be temporary but the habits that they help to instill among residents may be life-long.
- This community-based intervention was founded on the desire to support women in transitional housing and help them develop the skills to transition to independent living. The program was embraced by the Paterson Task Force and St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center.
- In the second year of the program, the curriculum has expanded and new partnerships have emerged.