Commitment to Health at Covenant House: Improving Health and Wellness of Unhoused Youth in New Orleans

BACKGROUND

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development altered the definition of homelessness, expanding the definition to encompass those who are “living in a place not meant for human habitation,” which includes individuals and families who struggle to remain in stable and safe, permanent housing environments. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the rate of homelessness in New Orleans drastically increased; some residents were displaced and without homes for a short period of time, while others have experienced chronic homelessness ever since due to the aftermath of the hurricane. As Hurricane Ida struck Louisiana on August 29, 2021, the sixteenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, ending homelessness still remains a major public health issue in the city of New Orleans. As of January 2020, 3,173 people experienced homelessness in Louisiana on any given day, with 246 of those individuals identified as youth. The cardiovascular and mental health issues associated with homelessness continue to affect the well-being of individuals throughout the lifespan, and individuals experiencing homelessness are disproportionately impacted by structural and social inequities. This population also has been shown to lack adequate access to quality, equitable health care treatment. The goals of this community project were to be a source of knowledge, resources, and opportunity regarding healthy lifestyle behaviors in the sectors of mental and physical health. The primary goal of this service-based program is to analyze and address barriers to healthy lifestyle behaviors among homeless youth impacted by homelessness in New Orleans and to improve health knowledge, health habits, self-efficacy, and health outcomes within this community. The health and wellness of unhoused youth in New Orleans is extremely important in the effort to enhance health equity and access among vulnerable groups and underserved communities.

Covenant House in New Orleans provides comprehensive services to more than 900 individuals each year for at-risk youth ages 18-25 years old, offering supportive housing, health resources, and educational and vocational services. Covenant House is not only a shelter for homeless youth; it serves as a source of protection, safety, and stability for young people in crisis. They assist all young people in making positive decisions about their future by providing guidance, education, and resources. The developing framework of this community project is an educational and interactive program that encompasses lifestyle, mental and spiritual well-being, and the environment.

OBJECTIVES

- To collaborate with various interprofessional health-related programs to provide educational workshops and interactive sessions regarding mental and physical health and wellness
- To identify and analyze barriers to healthy lifestyle behaviors among youth impacted by homelessness
- To provide educational information and resources regarding health and wellness, specifically mental and physical health
- To measure the efficacy of educational workshops and interactive sessions using postworkshop questionnaires
- To improve self-esteem and self-efficacy of unhoused youth
- To improve understanding of mental and physical health among unhoused youth
- To improve ability to practice self-care and mental health among unhoused youth
- To improve ability to practice nutritional health among unhoused youth

METHODS

- Two focus groups were held at Covenant House to assess the current attitudes, health perceptions, and needs of the youth residing at or receiving services from Covenant House
- The originally-developed program was scheduled as a 10-week education series; it was reduced to 8 weeks due to COVID-19, weather, and external social factors
- The bi-weekly sessions were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings

- Mental Health Monday
- Wellness Wednesday
- Fitness Friday

- Community-based participatory research is the underlying scientific approach utilized in Commitment to Health at Covenant House

- This is a collaborative process that engages community members, employs local knowledge in the understanding of health problems and the designs of interventions, and invests community members in the processes and products of research

RESULTS

Qualitative feedback displayed that residents felt as though they learned information that they originally did not know about and that they enjoyed activities where they were able to create artwork or yoga. The themes of what was most enjoyable about the program include talking with people, getting information about mental and physical health, in addition to how the staff, volunteers, and facilitators interact with the residents. Residents described that they could trust staff and volunteers with content discussed and that they appreciated their sense of freedom and being treated like an adult. Another common theme is a feeling of support; residents mentioned that programs provided them an opportunity to heal, a chance to become the best version of themselves, and the feeling of having a second family and that people care about them. The residents who rated the Commitment to Health at Covenant House programming reported that they enjoyed the sessions overall.

CONCLUSIONS

Commitment to Health at Covenant House has been a program that has been well-received and supported by residents and staff at Covenant House. The program was planned, developed, implemented, and evaluated with continuous, equitable input from the involved community members. Throughout the program, there was collaboration between Covenant House and various organizational entities, which led to the success of the educational sessions. In the first year of the program, the Covenant House staff were incredibly supportive and helpful in providing insight and guidance throughout the program planning, development, implementation, and evaluation phases. Some LSU Health New Orleans School of Medicine interest groups that helped to support the goals of the program were the Student National Medical Association, the Latino Medical Student Association, Cardiology Interest Group, Medicine in Motion, Mindfulness in Medicine, and Women in Medicine. All interest groups were very important when offering volunteers, donations, support, or their time when delivering educational presentations or facilitating group activities at Covenant House. The focus group participants and residents, including improved knowledge, self-efficacy, and perceptions regarding health and wellness.

CITATIONS

- https://www.covenanthousenola.org