

StreetHealth

Overview – StreetHealth is a one-of-a-kind program that provides access to behavioral health services to the homeless through direct patient care at homeless encampments.

Challenge – Alameda County faces an unprecedented housing crisis. According to the County’s point-in-time count (PITC), between 2015 to 2017, people experiencing homelessness increased by 39%, and between 2017 and 2019 a 43% increase. Details from the 2019 PITC are pending, however, of those who participated in the 2017 PITC, 41% had a self-reported psychiatric condition, 29% reported experiencing post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD), and 26% indicated that they have a substance use disorder. These figures confirm a notable increase in the number of persons experiencing homelessness with significant mental health and substance use disorders, observed by the County’s Health Care for the Homeless (ACHCH) providers. Facing barriers such as unstable living arrangements, poor access to health and social services, and no transportation; members of this population often never access psychiatric care, instead using emergency services, a high cost service setting where mental health conditions cannot be effectively addressed.

Solution – ACHCH is a federally qualified health center (FQHC) and county health department-based network of providers that is nationally recognized for providing patient-centered mobile and clinic-based homeless health care services. In 2017, ACHCH launched the street psychiatry program “StreetHealth” which provides access to behavioral health services through direct patient care at homeless encampments. StreetHealth was developed as a multidisciplinary team that works out of a small mobile unit and consists of a part-time psychiatrist, a nurse care manager, and outreach workers all with behavioral health expertise. Services provided by the team include street-based harm reduction psychiatry, including psychiatric evaluation, assessment, and treatment with medications provided directly in the field. They also are the link to clinic-based psychiatric care and therapy, as well as a bridge to intensive case management services for patients with severe and persistent mental illness. Substance use services are also provided, including on-demand Medication-Assisted Therapy (i.e. MAT, buprenorphine, naloxone), an evidence-based intervention that employs the use of medications with counseling to treat addiction to opioids.

Innovation – StreetHealth is one of only four programs in the nation providing buprenorphine directly in encampments. Historically, there are many regulations around the use of buprenorphine, which has deterred physicians from regularly using it. Homeless people have an especially hard time accessing this medication due to strict program requirements. Through StreetHealth the county has created a low-barrier, flexible buprenorphine program that is understanding of the specific cultural challenges/needs of persons experiencing homelessness including: 1) providing the opportunity for “home inductions,” which allows patients to start the medication themselves in a setting and a time that is convenient for them; 2) partnering directly with a local pharmacy to overcome many of the traditional challenges clinics face providing the medication; and 3) working closely with a partner clinic where patients are actively linked and can continue their care at a “brick and mortar”.

Results – The most recent StreetHealth evaluation (service from April 2018-March 2019) reveals 287 unique individuals received outreach services, including: Harm Reduction/Substance Use/MH: All individuals received harm reduction education, 73 received Narcan, 19 received buprenorphine, nine reversed an opioid overdose with naloxone. Primary Care: 31 connected to Primary Care, 24 of whom had three or more visits with Primary Care providers. Psychiatry: 53 psychiatric assessments were administered, and 37 prescribed medications including antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotics.

Replicability – StreetHealth is a highly replicable program as services are primarily supported through federal Human Resources and Services Administration funding. Currently there are 296 Health Care for the Homeless grantees in the nation, 45 of which are in California. Recognizing the potential impact of the program as well as the possibility of program replication, StreetHealth has drafted a detailed overview of the program and its policies with the specific intent of helping other health departments and healthcare-for-the-homeless providers launch their own programs.

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