

5) Health Care for the Homeless

Mercy Medical Center, Sisters of Providence Health System

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Our Healthcare for the Homeless (HCH) Program addresses the health needs of homeless people in Western Massachusetts, defined as a special vulnerable population by the Health Resources and Services Administration. This program defines homelessness in the broadest terms to assist the greatest number of people in need of care, including those living outside, in shelters, in treatment programs, “doubled up” on someone else’s couch, in motels, or otherwise vulnerable to unstable housing. For the past 30 years, this program has grown to address the needs of the homeless with a wraparound approach that provides patients with medical, mental health, and case management assistance. Today, the mobile, 20-member HCH clinical team follows a patient-centered model of health care, providing assessment, intervention, referrals, follow-up, and disease management education. The program delivers services at 23 sites in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin Counties, and annually serves over 2,500 homeless individuals and families in nearly 13,000 medical encounters. The geographic area of the proposed project encompasses urban, suburban and rural regions, spanning 1,800 square miles.

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

- A decrease in health care costs and increase in appropriate care by redirecting homeless persons who are high end utilizers of hospital emergency departments to primary care and intensive case management.
- A program increase in women’s health screenings that surpassed standard goal requirements for federally funded health centers.
- Research demonstrates that homeless individuals are 4 times more likely to enter the ED and 4 times more likely to be admitted to the hospital. Reaching out to homeless individuals at their place of shelter, residency, and and/or the streets insures reduced hospital and ED admissions.

LESSONS LEARNED

- A low staff to client ratio supports high quality case management and allows for administrative time.
- When clients are educated on the importance of cancer screening, and encouraged by providers, they are empowered to be examined even while living in precarious circumstances.
- The integrated model of care for primary care, mental health services and dental services insures a medical home and continuity of care for a very transient population.