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UW medical students help get homeless back on track

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P-I REPORTER

They're not doctors yet, but they're already making house calls.

Every Sunday afternoon, University of Washington medical students hold a clinic at the Aloha Inn, where homeless people make the transition from life on the streets to living at their own address.

For most residents here, health care has been an afterthought, if any thought at all.

Most don't have health insurance. Most are saving whatever money they have to move into an apartment. For many of them, the months and often years exposed to the elements, the bad diets and the sporadic, often manual, labor have taken their toll.

"People become homeless for various reasons and wonder how they can get back on their feet," said Betty Harris, 54, a resident at Aloha since July and a former liaison between the students and residents.

Since 2003, about five students at a time from medical, dental, social work and pharmacy schools rotate through the weekly clinic, coordinated by the UW's student-run organization Students in the Community. They check residents for chronic illnesses, including diabetes, hypertension, heart conditions and sleep disorders, while a physician or school faculty member supervises.

The students' diagnoses aren't official, and they can't treat the residents or prescribe medications. Still, they are able to refer them to local clinics or hospitals for further treatment. They give regular physicals and answer health questions to help residents manage their lifestyles and diets better.

"The students keep the residents in for thorough exams, even if they only go in for a problem with a toe," Harris said. "Now that they are in a better situation, they can really focus on their health."

Yulanda Montgomery, a resident of Aloha for several months, said, "The students are very dependable, and they give you the care needed, especially since most (residents) don't have a regular doctor they can go to or afford."

The students help residents take another step in their overall transition into a new life, while volunteering to gain real world experience, which doesn't even count as class credit.

"We're helping to teach them how to be good doctors, how to listen and respect people from all different backgrounds and lifestyles," said Flo Beaumon, longtime program manager for Aloha Inn.

Of the 66 residents living at Aloha, most are disabled in some way, she said. Some suffer from mental illness; some are recovering alcoholics and drug abusers.

Steve DiBernardo, who came to Aloha six months ago after struggling for years with anxiety, bipolar disorder



zoom

Andy Rogers / P-I

Michael Bumgarner, a resident at the Aloha Inn, is examined by University of Washington students Angel Mathis, left, and Jessica Hunsberger at a free weekly health clinic.

and agoraphobia, said the students at the clinic have helped him, a former race walker, manage his high blood pressure and diet, and have helped get him back in racing form.

Now, DiBernardo, who started a walking club with other residents, is the liaison between the residents and the students, relaying to them what residents want and reminding residents of clinic appointments each week.

"The clinic is a nurturing thing, a supportive thing," he said. "It's just another layer to a program that I think is pretty healthy for anyone to be involved with."

Kirsten Sayson, 26, a medical student at the UW, was among those in various health disciplines at the UW that Students in the Community sent to volunteer at Aloha.

"Service learning is how I learn best," said Sayson, a Vancouver, B.C., native. "I was looking for something that would make my studies applicable, and this made the hours in a classroom more relevant.

"Anytime there's a face, anytime there's a personal connection, your ability to sympathize and empathize is greatly increased," Sayson said. "It's an opportunity to interact and learn their stories and realize they are people with problems -- just like me."

The program is working to add mental health assessments to the clinic and offer insurance and benefits seminars to help residents receive one-on-one help with their finances. The students also run a bicycle program and a vegetable program at the Inn, so when they tell residents to eat properly and exercise, they have a way to do it.

And as the lingering aroma of cigarette smoke floated throughout Aloha's rooms, the students also helped residents quit smoking. Besides being a health hazard, smoking can be a fire hazard. Beaumon didn't want that. So last week the Inn became smoke-free. Through a pilot program through the Washington Department of Health, which provides patches and materials to help smokers quit, the students also have helped residents such as Yulanda Montgomery quit smoking.

Montgomery, who landed at Aloha more than nine months ago after a divorce, manages her high blood pressure each week and continues to stay away from cigarettes.

"This helps take the stress off of you while you get yourself together," she said.

Aaron McCloud, 31, a senior physicians assistant student at the UW, worked to arrange smoking-cessation classes and support for the residents. He has worked with the Aloha clinic for nearly two years, volunteering to help staff once or twice a month.

"Volunteering at the Aloha Inn has been very inspirational to me in regards to providing motivation to help others," he said. "I have such incredible respect for the obstacles that the residents have overcome and am constantly thrilled to be able to help them make positive changes in their lives."

ON THE WEB

Learn more at www.alohainn.org

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