

TITLE: Housing as a social determinant of health: stories from the front line

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STUDENT SUBMISSION: No

TOPIC/TARGET AUDIENCE: Public health professionals interested in addressing housing as a social determinant of health; policy makers and researchers interested in understanding the complexity of issues surrounding interventions to address social determinants of health.

ABSTRACT: Social determinants of health are “wicked” problems that are deeply rooted in social and political history, and exert strong influences on health outcomes across the lifecourse. Housing is one such social determinant; people with chronic homelessness experience high rates of morbidity and mortality. This presentation will share different perspectives from a multi-disciplinary group working to house people with homelessness and chronic medical conditions. Representatives from a housing social service agency, a healthcare system, and a county health department will provide insight into why housing is critical for improving health outcomes and reducing health disparities, and share some of the challenges that accompany this work. We will share data on Benton County’s homeless population and preliminary efforts to characterize the healthcare utilization of this population, as well as stories of navigating logistical, personal, political, legal, and other barriers to securing sustainable housing for individuals with homelessness. The audience will gain a practical understanding of the challenges inherent in intervening on a social determinant of health and take away some lessons learned from this multi-sector collaboration.

OBJECTIVE(S): Explain the importance of housing to improve health outcomes among individuals with homelessness

List challenges to providing sustainable housing for people with homelessness

Compare perspectives from different sectors involved in supporting individuals with homelessness and chronic medical conditions

PANEL MODERATOR: Paulina Kaiser, Samaritan Health Services

PANEL ABSTRACT 1: Corvallis Housing First (CHF) provides housing, case management, and rental assistance services in Corvallis, including operating Partners Place and the Van Buren House. CHF is also involved in the men’s cold weather shelter in Corvallis, open annually from November through March. In 2013-2018 (four shelter seasons), 687 men spent at least one night in the shelter; 38.0% of these men spent 1-5 nights at the shelter, 35.8% spent 6-39 nights at the shelter, and 26.2% spent 40 or more nights at the shelter. Half of the men (51.3%) reported being homeless for more than a year, and more than half had stayed in Corvallis or within 10 miles of town in the previous year. Approximately half of the population was interested in finding permanent supported housing, and the other half in transitional housing. Many of the men also have chronic health issues but often do not seek regular medical care, for a variety of reasons including fear of being stigmatized by medical professionals. Providing stable shelter to this population is a critical first step towards establishing relationships with multidisciplinary care providers in order to improve health.

PRESENTER 1: Brad Smith, Corvallis Housing First

PANEL ABSTRACT 2: Samaritan Health Services is a nonprofit regional healthcare system that serves Linn, Benton, and Lincoln Counties, anchored by the Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center in Corvallis. Homeless patients are anecdotally suspected to have high rates of emergency department (ED) utilization and hospitalization, though no systematic analysis had been done and homelessness is inconsistently documented in electronic medical records. We cross-referenced Samaritan records with a list of men and women who had spent at least one night at a Corvallis cold weather shelter in 2016-2018, and found 261 individuals who collectively had 629 visits to Samaritan EDs and 127 hospitalizations in a one-year period; two-thirds of this group had at least one ED visit or hospitalization. The most common reasons for seeking care were pain, mental health issues, and respiratory problems. In recent years, Samaritan has embedded care coordinators and health navigators in primary care clinics and developed a team of case managers in the hospital to assist with discharge planning and ensure continuity of care. We will describe these efforts and additional plans to improve care for homeless patients.

PRESENTER 2: Tanya Grant, Samaritan Health Services

PANEL ABSTRACT 3: Housing as a critical determinant of health is an important topic for health departments. Benton County Health Department (BCHD) has pursued two parallel strategies for addressing housing: by advocating for policy change to ameliorate some of the structural barriers to housing, and by training and deploying health navigators to provide one-on-one support for individuals with a variety of social service needs, including housing. At the policy level, BCHD facilitated a year-long community engagement and planning process to produce the 2017 report on “Community Strategies to Overcome Homelessness and Barriers to Housing” with the support of the Housing Opportunities Action Council of Benton County. This report identified eight keystone strategies to provide long-term, sustainable solutions to homelessness. At the individual support level, the development of a training hub for health navigators and growth of the program has resulted in dozens of health navigators currently working across Benton and Linn Counties, including many embedded in Samaritan’s primary care clinics. These navigators fill a crucial gap for patients by providing transportation, health education, connection to social service agencies, and assistance with insurance and navigating the health system. While highlighting successes of this work, we will also discuss the challenges that we face.

PRESENTER 3: Tatiana Dierwechter, Benton County Health Department

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