

BU School of Medicine

OUTREACH VAN PROJECT

January 2016 Issue



Meeting people where they are...

The Outreach Van Project (OVP) is a service-learning elective at BUSM, which comprises a service component (weekly van trips) and a learning component (monthly educational events).

OVP: Service

OVP, composed of 32 students, travels to East Boston every Thursday evening of the year, including the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. A team of eight students, a physician and a social worker serve the homeless community by delivering hot soup, clothing, groceries and toiletries. During these outings, we engage the homeless population in conversation, inquiring about their lives, recent events and any medical issues they might have. We also act as a referral service for detoxification programs and shelters, and our medical outreach committee has integrated education concerning common health conditions seen in the homeless population like frostbite and hypertension.

OVP: Learning

Over the past semester OVP has addressed many issues that surround homeless and community health. OVP members have participated in an interview skills workshop, Narcan training class and a walking tour of Boston shelters. We have several other events scheduled for upcoming weeks including a talk on substance abuse and disability in the homeless population and Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP) grand rounds.

If you are interested in learning more about OVP or have any questions, e-mail us at outreach@bu.edu or visit our website at <http://blogs.bu.edu/outreach>.



Service

Two volunteer nurses from BHCHP counsel a regular client out in East Boston.



Learning

Dr. Gaeta gives the students of OVP and HHIE a guided tour of BHCHP.



OVP Newsletter Reflection - Woods Mullen Shelter

By Alessandro Colletta

About a year ago concerns about the structural integrity of the Long Island Bridge, connecting the island in Boston Harbor to the mainland, led the city officials to announce its shutdown. This resulted in the discontinuance of the Long Island shelter, Boston's largest homeless shelter and other detox treatment programs, like Andrew House, and jeopardized the social safety net of the city. For many years, the bridge allowed authorized vehicles to bring an average of 440 homeless people onto the island nightly, where they would be offered a safe respite. Following the bridge closure on Oct. 8, 2014, the Woods-Mullen shelter, together with the Southampton Street shelter and other transitional housing programs, ramped up their efforts to offer homeless individuals in Boston overnight refuge, food and emergency clothing.

Earlier this semester, OVP members were given a tour of the Woods-Mullen shelter and observed the living conditions of homeless individuals in Boston. At this emergency shelter, 190 bunk beds are available. Tickets are given out to men and women on a first-come, first-served basis beginning at 4 PM. In the winter months, when the climate is particularly rigid, overflow beds and chairs are added in the atrium to accommodate more people. As you can imagine communal sleeping space is limited and it has become particularly crowded since the closure of the Long Island Shelter. Yet, this shelter represents a location where underserved individuals can receive basic necessities and are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. The employees and managers strive to serve every client and create a welcoming and peaceful environment.

This trip to Woods-Mullen shelter, as well as our weekly van trips in the Greater Boston area, have lead me to realize and truly appreciate the intrinsic value of a warm meal, clean clothing, personal safety and social bonding – needs, which we may take for granted at times. By uniting our efforts and working as a team, we can pursue initiatives that offer our clients a new beginning and infuse hope into their lives. I also hope our volunteering activities can help all members of our community become more aware about homelessness and inspire them to collaborate in order to alleviate this sad dimension of our society.

Intro to OVP

Who are we?

Every Thursday night, a group of Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) students delivers food, clothing and health awareness to an underserved population in East Boston. We call ourselves the Outreach Van Project (OVP).

Goals

1. To provide basic necessities to the underserved populations in the form of food, clothing, toiletries, dental supplies and basic medical care supervised by a physician;
2. To make concerted efforts to connect people that are underserved to primary care and to other community services such as shelters and detoxification programs;
3. To give students an opportunity for hands-on involvement working with underserved populations in the Greater Boston areas.

History

At the time of its inception, OVP was simply a group of medical and public health students hoping to positively impact surrounding areas of Boston. This dream began in January 1997, when OVP began its mission at the Suffolk Downs Racetrack. OVP served this site for two years, during which time it helped a largely Latino migrant worker population. In 1999, OVP expanded its coverage to the Cambridge and Somerville communities. In 2000, OVP began reaching out to the more underserved area of East Boston, where we still deliver our care today.



Woods-Mullen tour led by David Thomas



BHCHP tour led by Dr. Jessie Gaeta

OVP, HHIE, and the Collaboration Effort

By Carolyn Kan

Homelessness remains a complex public health issue locally and globally. Each year, millions of people are stranded on the streets. Especially in Boston, the extreme gap between income and housing costs has left many struggling to find affordable housing or deal with being homeless (1). Unfortunately, being homeless comes with many intrinsic challenges in addition to finding shelter – finding food, warm clothing, safety, and even companionship. These daily challenges most often overshadow health needs, leaving common illnesses to progress and worsen. In fact, the homeless population has been found to have the highest percentage of untreated chronic illnesses (2). The Outreach Van Project (OVP) and the Homeless Health Immersion Experience (HHIE) have made it their goals to provide assistance with day-to-day living and medical help.

Spanning almost 20 years since its first van trip in 1997, OVP has become the oldest running service-learning organization at BUSM. Its mission is simple – to provide basic necessities and resources to the homeless population around the Boston area. Every week for three hours, students accompanied by a licensed physician drive to the East Boston area and provide clothes, shoes, groceries, toiletries and hot meals directly to the homeless, as well as assist in giving flu shots and basic medical screenings. OVP is the only outreach organization serving the underserved community in East Boston.

C. Park, a first-year BUSM student, joined OVP for its outreach values. As she began to make trips to East Boston, she cited that she loved being able to reach out to this community, where she has had made many connections with the homeless individuals who come to the van every week. In addition to outreach, OVP leadership is divided into several subcommittees – PR, outreach, clothing, food and groceries – each working to ensure materials are available each week, in addition to keeping the community-at-large informed of our work. The simple mission and systematic approach to OVP has kept it alive and growing over the last two decades.

Similarly, HHIE was founded a couple years ago with a similar goal to work with the homeless population. While its objectives are similar, its methods in doing so are different. Instead of going out to the streets, HHIE focuses on serving the patients around BMC, namely at the Barbara McInnis House and outpatient care center of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless (BHCHP) building. Students are given the educational tools they need to conduct medical interviews on the homeless patients, further strengthening their interviewing skills and exposure to a wider patient population. O. Stranding, a BUSM student serving in HHIE, said that the appeal of working in the respite house and the overall more medically oriented approach to working with the homeless drew him into this program. Similarly, P. Curtin joined

OVP, HHIE, and the Collaboration Effort (continued)

HHIE because he wanted the opportunity to experience a group typically more underrepresented. He cites that Dr. Cohen and Dr. Wishik are the “epitome of the Hippocratic Oath, [as] they are truly here for the right reasons to help people.”

With similar characteristics and end goals, both HHIE and OVP have been actively working with the same general population. In 2012, the two organizations decided for the first time to join forces, and a new ‘homeless educational elective’ was created. The purpose of the elective is to bring together both organizations and unify their common goals, specifically through combined monthly educational seminars, panels and reflections. These monthly events are designed to further strengthen and enhance our understanding of caring for the homeless.

E. Wilson, a third-year BUSM student and one of the student leaders who created the elective, said, “The goal was to allow students who participated in these groups to share their experiences with each other. Since HHIE sees patients in the clinic and OVP sees patients on the street, we felt it was important for students to understand both aspects of patient care. Through combining the lecture series OVP already had in their curriculum and opening up discussion between students, members of both groups can achieve a complete understanding of what care for the homeless population entails both inside and outside the clinic.” Dr. Sarfaty, who serves as the faculty liaison for both organizations, supported the integration, saying that it was “something that was bound to happen for two student groups with such similar mission and goals.”

Three years later, the combined elective is going strong. For this past semester, we held four monthly events, which included an introductory reflection series, a panel with residents working with the homeless population, walking tours of the Boston homeless shelters, and a post-reflection of the semester’s work. When asked about the overall feeling towards the monthly events, most members from both organizations felt the monthly events to be helpful. One member stated that it was “nice knowing what the other group was doing, and to see the various needs of the homeless in different perspectives.” Another felt the post-reflections were “enlightening and helped correlate others’ experiences with hers.” In addition to these comments, there also were also some suggestions for improvement, which included having specific activities address the members’ various experiences from OVP and HHIE, cohesive discussions about current homelessness issues, making the meetings highly recommended but not required for everyone, and opening a more direct line of communication between the members and the student leaders. As one member put it, “You know both groups semi-well, but not your own group very well.”

Both OVP and HHIE have much to offer, not only to the homeless but also to the student members. By actively bringing together the different experiences from each organization, only then can we further understand the many complexities of the homeless population and how best to care for them moving forward.

References:

1. Johnston, Katie. “Survey finds acute homelessness in Boston.” *BostonGlobe*. BostonGlobe, 11 Dec 2014.
2. St. Michael’s Hospital. “85 percent of homeless people have chronic health conditions.” *ScienceDaily*. ScienceDaily, 24 Aug 2011.



Student Reflections

“Going out on trips and witnessing the conditions some people live day-to-day helps me put my life into perspective.”

“It has made me think differently about the homeless I see day to day and what their stories might be.”

“It was amazing to see the level of positivity and happiness in some of the clients, even when all odds seemed to be against them.”

“Homelessness is structural and can happen to anyone.”



Flu Shots

Dr. Gaeta showed the students of OVP how to administer flu shots. In order to advertise this service out on the van, the outreach committee created a banner to hang outside whenever we were giving out flu shots.



Navigating Unpredictability

By Savi Racha

Five years ago when I first came to Boston, I had no idea what kind of weather I would experience. Apparently the phrase “April showers bring May flowers” is not true everywhere. I quickly learned that Boston rains whenever it wants. In fact, it’s raining today! It’s December. I couldn’t afford the frizzy hair anymore so I made some lifestyle changes. I started checking the weather in the morning. I also got myself an umbrella (the obnoxious floral kind); it was the only way to survive the weather.

While this is a crude example, the point remains. When faced with unpredictable circumstances, one must adapt accordingly. And when a person loses stable housing, everything becomes unpredictable. A warm shower? A clean bed? The next meal? To a homeless person, all these things are up in the air.

This unpredictability bleeds into family life as well. One of our clients named Alexander talked to us about how homelessness has affected his relationship with his son. He says, “I do not get to see him as much as I want to, and I miss him when I do not see him. The last time I saw him was two weeks ago in the park. I hope to see him again before the next month. I love my baby.”

Alexander, like many others, has had to adapt to the unpredictability of his situation. But sometimes these adaptations aren’t always the best ones. Homeless people often struggle with problems like substance abuse and mental illness. Priorities shift from long-term to short-term and health takes a back seat to daily survival.

Substance abuse and mental illness are conditions that we witness directly out on the van. When a client is in a compromised state, it complicates our abilities to effectively communicate with him or her. One OVP student describes an encounter with an intoxicated client as follows: “He wasn’t making much sense in what he was saying. He was just telling us to leave and we were telling him we were leaving. It was really unclear what exactly he was trying to tell us.” When clients behave in this manner, it is very difficult to gauge their behaviors. “I didn’t know what he would do and because of that I also didn’t know what I should do,” the student explains.

In a sense, this client fought fire with fire. He couldn’t beat the unpredictability of his environment, so he joined it. And now that fire burns even brighter.

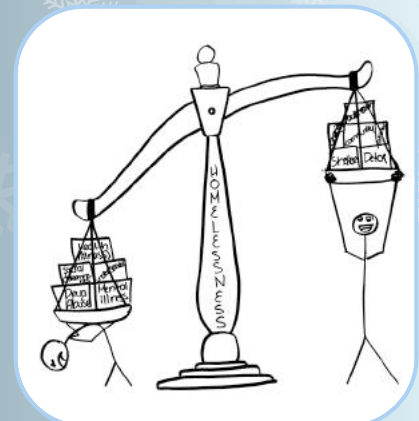
OVP can’t put out the fire entirely, but it does bring some consistency to the chaos. A homeless individual in East Boston may not know if he will get into a shelter that night, but he knows that every Thursday evening from 7-8 p.m. there will be a van parked on the corner of Border and Saratoga streets with hot food, warm clothing and people who care.

Words from Our Clients

Ralph: “If I didn’t have this [OVP] right now, there would be a good chance I could go hungry tonight. Or have to make a choice on this or that, and that’s never a good thing. I think that I like the whole deal about what you guys are doing, it’s wonderful.”

Al: “I like the smiles on the students’ faces, because when you look like a bum, a bum doesn’t have a smile, but they do! I like them, and I care that they brought their volunteer and their extra credit here, so I like to come and thank them. Even if I get nothing, I like to thank them for their time and their effort. They’re taking out their Thursday night, no matter sleet or snow or storm or whatever.”

Karen: “What you guys do is amazing. It is really nice of you to come out and give us all this free food. Luckily, I will be getting my paycheck tomorrow so I can actually buy food on my own, but for tonight and the rest of the other nights before, this is a lifesaver.”



Support OVP



Here are a few ways that you can help:

1. Send a tax-deductible donation for any amount to the address below (check payable to Outreach Van Project)
2. Volunteer to work with OVP. BUSM students can apply to the elective in the fall or join for open sign-ups during holidays and vacations. If you are interested in getting involved, e-mail us at outreach@bu.edu.
3. Share your skills as a physician, nurse, dentist, or health care worker in treating the underserved.
4. Organize a food or clothing drive in your community. For donations of food and clothing, please email outreach@bu.edu for more details.
5. Send the necessary documents to the address below if your company has a matching gift program.
6. Tell others about our work.

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