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Health care initiative seeks to aid low-income families

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Suffering from the flu or receiving a cut on an arm are not major health crises. For most people, medications and antibiotics are easily accessible. For many families, health insurance usually covers the cost of such ailments. Because they have the means to address their health concerns - and therefore are not preoccupied about the state of their health - those individuals are able to focus on creating better lives for themselves through their education and work.

But what happens when a person is too poor to afford health insurance? Who worries about education when a cut becomes infected? What happens when that flu is the result of malnutrition and a weak immune system?

Other aspects associated with leading a productive life become secondary when a person or family living in poor health has trouble finding health care assistance.

Enter Project HEALTH, a movement of social workers, physicians and student volunteers dedicated not only to ensuring that low-income families receive sufficient medical care, but also to discovering and correcting the root causes of health-related problems.

"We are all working to change the health care system by breaking the barrier between poverty and poor health," said Julia Gerard, a Loyola senior who volunteers with the program.

Established in 1996 at the Boston Medical Center Pediatrics Department, Project HEALTH has since expanded to five other cities, including Providence, Chicago, New York City, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. Project HEALTH volunteers seek to address more than just the final symptoms of a health-related ailment. According to their website, projecthealth.org, the program solves health crises by connecting families and individuals to services that provide housing for those without homes, food for those who are unable to afford it and job training for those seeking employment.

"We get the entire back story of those families in order to uncover the root causes of issues," said Mark Marino, the executive director of Project HEALTH in Baltimore. "We use a broad, holistic approach as an entry point to discover the smaller issues afflicting families."

To facilitate the connections between families and various social services, Project HEALTH works closely with local clinics and physicians to set up Family Help Desks, areas staffed by college undergraduates where families receive assistance filing for different services. Physicians write "prescriptions" for food, housing, job training, health insurance and other resources. Then, families are directed toward these Family Help Desks, where the student volunteers work one-on-one to help people obtain the crucial government and community resources that alleviate families' health crises and enable families to access increased income and better education.

"[We] look at root causes, not symptoms," Gerard said. "When people go to the doctor, there are multiple elements funneled into that final symptom; health is an expression of all these different variables [joblessness, inadequate housing, insufficient food and so on] playing out in this scenario."

Since coming to Baltimore in 2006, Project HEALTH has made great strides in improving its operation.

Initially, the program was nothing more than a mobile needle exchange van that would drive around Baltimore and enable people to dispose of old needles. Many individuals lacked housing and had no access to e-mail, meaning there could be virtually no follow-up with clients.

According to Gerard, however, "[We] had a decent follow-up with clients in light of those difficulties."

Eventually the Baltimore program expanded, and Project HEALTH-Baltimore became the first location to work with adult and substance abuse clinics. Today, the program works with multiple clinics in Baltimore City; student volunteers for the program are drawn from Johns Hopkins University, University of Maryland, Baltimore County and Loyola College.

Student volunteers make up the foundation for much of what Project HEALTH does; said Gerard, "Everything that Project HEALTH does is run by students." Indeed, even Project HEALTH's mission statement is student-focused - the program's goal is to "mobilize undergrads to break the link between poverty and poor health."

Why such a focus on students?

"The great thing about college students is how dedicated and hard-working they are," Gerard said. "Students are at a great point because they're still forming their ideas about policy. Project HEALTH gives us first-hand exposure at real situations."

According to the Project HEALTH website, college undergraduates "have the time, tenacity and creativity required to navigate the complex landscape of community services and government bureaucracies."

In addition to staffing the Family Help Desks, student volunteers maintain connections with the families and individuals they work with and serve as a resource should additional assistance be required in the future. The program needs a wide range of students from a wide range of majors, including students interested in law, public policy, business, social work and, of course, health.

Adam Persak, a Loyola sophomore majoring in Biology, was looking to volunteer with something related to health care. After volunteering with Project HEALTH his freshman year, he's excited to be returning to the program.

"It's like a different world," said Persak. "There are people who are really struggling."

Persak said he enjoys working with Project HEALTH because of the real-world experience and the opportunity he has to give back to the Baltimore community. "It's unfair that just because

you grew up in a certain area you should be more susceptible to poorer [health] care."

Persak continued, noting that the program "really broadened and opened my eyes to a community that three-quarters of the Loyola community are sheltered from."

Lauren Tozzi, another Loyola sophomore and the Project HEALTH service coordinator for Loyola's Center for Community Service and Justice, said she enjoys "working with volunteers and getting them to experience the value of giving back to a marginalized group of people."

Regarding the future of Project HEALTH in Baltimore and the rest of the country, Marino is excited and optimistic. This past year, Project HEALTH received a considerable grant from New Profit, a corporation dedicated to providing financial support for organizations seeking to have a transformative influence on a variety of America's pressing social problems. Marino would like to see Project HEALTH expand to many more cities and communities nationwide.

"Project HEALTH addresses concerns that aren't being resolved and really can't be resolved in the current health system," Marino said.

Marino is also excited to be starting another year with the help of Loyola volunteers. "Loyola students have brought a very unique energy and a tremendous amount of sheer tenacity to help these families get the services they need."