Student Collaborations Promote Immigrant Healthcare

University Students Provide Free Health Screening to Day Laborers

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Since 2009, students from the Samuel Merritt University (SMU) Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) and Physician Assistant (PA) programs have been providing free health screening checks to an underserved community in South Hayward.

For the past year SMU students have been volunteering their weekends to work at the Hayward Day Labor Center (HDLC) off of West Tennyson Road in Hayward where crowds of immigrant day workers gather each morning and afternoon looking for hourly jobs. The majority of people who are seen at the multi-use Center are undocumented immigrants and low-income families with no insurance.

"Samuel Merritt University is committed to improving the well-being of the communities we serve, regardless of an individual's ability to pay," said Dr. Suzanne August-Schwartz, SMU Assistant Professor in the School of Nursing and program director. "In collaboration with community partners like the Hayward Day Labor Center, we take healthcare education, screenings and support services out to its primary and secondary community."

The problems we see with day laborers are not often isolated physical issues, but manifestations of a combination of psychological, chronic muscular issues and illness," said Dr. August-Schwartz. "The student volunteers from a variety of disciplines - be it nursing, physician assistant, or physical therapy - enable us to address the whole individual. The community support from area health clinics, such as the Davis Street Family Re-

For just a short wait, uninsured individuals, family, and day laborers are able to speak with supervised nursing and physician assistant students about symptoms, pains, and basically any general health concern. SMU students offer basic health screenings for blood pressure, vision and depression; they also strive to educate non-insured workers about preventing injuries and chronic conditions, such as heart and skin diseases. The students also administer referrals for specialized medical appointments, pass out health education materials and counsel about substance abuse, depression, and anxiety.
source Center in San Leandro, allows us to follow up with patients, a critical component to maintaining good health."

According to the Center’s staff, 86 percent of patients who come for the free health screening are bilingual in Spanish and an additional indigenous language, such as the Mayan language K’iche’. Most patients are from Guatemala. That’s not a problem for PA student Britta Hult. She is fluent in Spanish after volunteering six months in Chile. She believes that two-way communication is the key to better care.

“When they learn that I do speak Spanish, you see a definite relief and opening up of their comfort level,” said Hult. “It benefits not only the patients who receive treatment, but also providers like myself who are no longer limited in the people they can help.”

“I feel comfortable with the students,” says Spanish-speaker Daniel Sanchez, a forklift driver working in Hayward. “They were nice and calm and very gentle. They listened to my concerns and it looks like a good team, they consulted each other all the time, which made me feel confident. I would come again.”

For Maria Escobar, a mother of two, a simple ‘Buenos Dias’ or ‘Gracias’ from FNP student Alberto Hernandez helped relieve some of her nerves. “I don’t speak English, but my two son’s do, but I worry maybe they won’t tell the nurse everything. Because he (Hernandez) speaks Spanish it makes me feel much better that he can understand all my concerns.”

In addition, SMU students offer more than just solutions to health problems, they offer emotional support and encouragement to the patients. The project also offers health information on topics such as safe lifting techniques, alcohol abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases.

“At first some patients were shy and didn’t know who we were, but after we explained that we are skilled students and we consult our findings with our faculty supervisors, they came to trust us and realized they have support from people they didn’t know even cared for them,” said FNP student Susan Donovan.

SMU students and faculty say they find they too have been positively impacted by the project. These practices broaden the students’ experiences, develop an understanding of the barriers the population face, and provide specific needs of day workers. It’s also an opportunity for the students to gain cultural competency to meet the healthcare needs of underserved persons where they live and work.

“Our students have the chance to gain real medical experience by focusing on interacting with patients, taking vitals and filling out medical history forms,” says Dr. August-Schwartz. “Working at the Day Labor Center also helps the students gain perspective on their career and future.”

“I am able to gain good experience. I definitely plan on continuing this type of work as a physician assistant,” said Hult. “There is such a shortage of doctors that we just need more people willing to help.”

Samuel Merritt University, located in Oakland, California, has been educating health science practitioners who are committed to making a positive difference in diverse communities since 1909. Nearly 1,400 students are enrolled at SMU, with campuses in Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco and San Mateo. The University offers an undergraduate degree in nursing; master's degrees in nursing, occupational therapy, and physician assistant; and doctoral degrees in nursing, physical therapy and podiatric medicine. For more information visit www.samuelmerritt.edu.