

LC1 Service-Learning Project: Brighton Center

Brighton Center is a community support organization serving members of the Newport, Kentucky community. Their mission is to create opportunities for individuals and families to reach self-sufficiency through family support services, education, employment, and leadership. They provide a wide range of programs and services which include meeting basic needs, adult and early childhood education, workforce development, substance abuse recovery for women, affordable housing, financial education and counseling, youth services, and neighborhood-based programs. Many of those in the Newport community lean on Brighton Center for support in many aspects of their lives, and that reliance only increased during the pandemic.

Covid-19 greatly impacted the need to protect the community via social distancing since the Brighton Center serves populations from particularly vulnerable backgrounds, namely the elderly. This, in turn, greatly impacted the ways in which we could interact with and implement our project with this community. Furthermore, a lack of technological insight existed within the population we worked with in a time when technology was required to implement many aspects of the project and to interact with our clients in general. This lack of technological awareness as well as the necessity of social distancing increased the reliance of those elderly individuals enrolled in the Club Care's on the Brighton Center for food and everyday necessities as well as social interaction.

As students, COVID-19 impacted our service-learning experience first by decreasing our ability to meet with each other. This not only affected our ability to discuss and work on the project, but also our ability to bond as a team and recognize our individual strengths and how we can best work together. On top of this, we were unable to visit the site of our community partner and interact with the community we were working with, and this hampered our learning of the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of the community.

COVID-19 has also negatively impacted many aspects of the lives of the senior residents at the Brighton Center. Because of their vulnerability to COVID-19 and the high risk setting of the elderly living facility, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed life for residents by directly impacting resident relationships and interactions with their social network in the outside world. Residents specifically noted their increased feelings of loneliness and isolation due to the restrictions on visits from family and friends. These feelings of isolation existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but were exacerbated by the requirement to social distance. Additionally, being confined to their rooms also increased feelings of helplessness and a loss of autonomy as the residents were unable to engage in those activities they normally would. This was only compounded by their own fear for what contracting COVID-19 might mean for themselves and their loved ones, specifically given their age group. On a scale of 1-4, residents averaged a 3 on fearing for the safety of their friends and family.

We conducted a survey asking the residents about how they felt day-to-day and how the pandemic specifically impacted their lives. One portion of the survey asked about symptoms of depression, and we found that only 16% experienced one or less of these symptoms. 20% reported feeling two or less symptoms, 25% reported feeling two or more and another 20% experienced three or more symptoms of depression. These symptoms include sadness, angry outbursts, loss of pleasure, sleep disturbances, reduced appetite, anxiety, and stress. Having five of these symptoms for two weeks would meet the current diagnostic criteria for Major Depressive Disorder. In terms of relaxation, 40% of respondents reported they rarely had someone in their life to have a good time with, had someone to relax with, or had someone to get their mind off their worries. On a scale of 1-4 with 1 being the least and 4 being the most, the residents averaged a score of 2.15 for loneliness, 2.75 for the fear of their own safety, a 2.78 for isolation, and only a 2.34 for positive social interactions.

Before the pandemic, the Brighton Center provided several programs for residents to keep them engaged in the community and provide them as much autonomy as possible. For example, the staff provided transportation to healthcare appointments, a community food pantry, and fun social events for the senior living facility residents. In order to keep them safe, these programs were suspended, and residents were isolated in their rooms. The food pantry became a food delivery program so residents did not have to go to the grocery store themselves. This further limited their autonomy by eliminating their choice in the food they received weekly. To meet the current social distancing guidelines while combatting the isolation many of their residents face even without a pandemic, the Brighton Center staff was forced to adjust their daily activity schedule. Since residents were no longer able to gather in the community areas to socialize, weekly BINGO and card games were moved to online platforms, which provided challenges for those in the living facilities without access to technology and still did not make up for the many lost face-to-face conversations. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted every aspect of those seniors living at the Brighton Center including their mental health, social support, diet, transportation, and extracurricular activities.

Prior to COVID-19, Brighton center residents were able to have family and friends come visit them in their apartments, allowing them to stay connected to their social support network while still maintaining their independence. In addition, there were planned social trips and volunteer opportunities for these residents to engage and remain connected with their local communities. Due to the pandemic, these social outings were cancelled. In addition, residents at Brighton Center were no longer allowed to have visitors and had to remain in their individual apartments. The sudden lack of social interactions and isolation can dramatically affect an individual's mental health. Healthcare professions have the responsibility to advocate for these individuals by emphasizing the importance of mental health during visits, connecting them with the appropriate resources, having discussions with families and loved ones, and finding ways to continue to have safe social interactions.

Again, as a result of these precautions, the decrease in social interaction impacted the residents' mental health and access to health care. As mental health and physical health are so closely associated, both were impacted by the pandemic and can be harmful to the well-being of both individuals and the community. Some residents were able to partake in socially distanced activities and rely on help from family and friends to access health care, but not all. As students and future physicians, we must advocate for these needs by highlighting the importance of and the relationship between mental and physical health. To address this, the Brighton center requires staff to coordinate strategies to increase social interaction, monitor mental health, and provide resources such as transportation, education, and scheduling, so patients can make and get to their appointments.

Community engagement alongside other residents was also highly impacted as the Brighton Center wished to reduce the interactions between residents to subsequently reduce the spread of the virus. Prior to these precautions, community engagement was one of the primary ways in which residents would interact with one another and form social connections. As the pandemic has evolved, the Brighton Center has developed various programs such as social distanced bingo to improve community engagement while also preventing the spread of the virus. It bears repeating that as healthcare professionals, we must advocate for not only the physical but the emotional and social wellbeing of our patients. To continue bridging the gap in community engagement and social interactions as the pandemic stretches on, the Brighton Center requires more participation in the pen pal program started last year and new ideas for programs that allow social distancing while taking technological insight into consideration.

Brighton Center has always prioritized access to healthy food for their clients. A choice food pantry was available for customers to have access to healthy produce as well as pantry staples. Throughout the pandemic, while the food pantry was closed, Brighton Center staff and volunteers made weekly deliveries to elderly adults in the Newport community to ensure they

still had access to healthy food options. As the pandemic has evolved, Brighton Center has moved to a mixed model of food delivery and an open food pantry. As healthcare professionals, we have a responsibility to advocate for improved access to healthy food, as we know this plays a major role in an individual's overall health and wellness. To continue this service for the Newport community, Brighton center requires both volunteers and the monetary resources necessary to provide healthy food options to their customers.

To provide the variety of critical services Brighton Center offers the Newport community, most notably to the elderly population, they require passionate and experienced volunteers. A primary way students, physicians, and community members can support Brighton Center is through volunteering and becoming involved with the community in which they serve. Beyond volunteering themselves, healthcare professionals must continue to advocate for those vulnerable members of our community.