

Service-Learning Assignment: *The Healing Center*

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted normal activities at The Healing Center, presenting unexpected challenges to service delivery but also highlighting opportunities for the future. In this paper, we explore the impact of the pandemic on The Healing Center and the community that it serves as well as future opportunities for physicians and medical students to advocate for this community.

I. Impact of Covid-19 on *The Healing Center* Operations

Covid-19 has presented many challenges to The Healing Center in communicating with their staff, volunteers and guests, providing services in a safe environment and allocating resources equitably.

The logistics, usage and supply of communication has presented new challenges for The Healing Center. Although most of the staff has been in-person since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, those who have been working remotely are facing difficulties reintegrating into the workflow. Additionally, videoconferencing technology, such as Zoom or other video chat rooms, has been hard to organize and use, especially with guests that utilize The Healing Center.

In attempts to continue providing services for guests, many of the services have transitioned to a virtual format. However, the lack of access to a reliable internet connection has created an additional obstacle to the implementation of such services, and fewer guests have been able to access them, even when offered virtually. In addition to the technology barriers, many were unlikely to answer the phone if they were unfamiliar with the number. This made it difficult to substitute other forms of social interaction for in-person relationships in a population that already trended towards isolation.

Along with changes in communication with volunteers and guests, volunteer numbers and roles have also changed recently. There has been a significant decrease in numbers, as most volunteers are older adults who feel uncomfortable coming back to The Healing Center due to concerns about their own health.

Despite the decreased presence of volunteers, The Healing Center has still been providing services to its guests, but those services have been both modified and reduced. Currently, food services are being provided through a drive-through. This drive-through service includes pre-packaged food which is then given to guests at the door. An official interpreter was hired specifically to help with communication at the drive-through service, as a significant percentage of guests require interpreter services. The Healing Center is considering maintaining the drive-through service when it reopens its food pantry, so it can continue to serve guests who are worried by contact in close quarters. When reopened, the food pantry will enforce strict precautionary guidelines to limit the spread of possible viral transmission. This includes mandating face masks, providing hand sanitizers throughout the building, limiting entrance to

one person per household, and beginning check-in at the guest's vehicle rather than inside the building. Despite these precautions to keep guests safe, The Healing Center feels that it still will not be able to fulfill its value of togetherness until the pandemic is over, stating, "We've met the physical needs, but we have lacked on meeting the community needs."

Due to the pandemic, there has been an increase in guests for food needs due to uncertainty regarding jobs and financial stability. Food supply has increased to meet the demand, and as the number of guests return to normal levels, food waste has increased. In addition to food, The Healing Center also provides educational classes; however, Covid-19 disrupted all in-person classes. Recently, The Healing Center began a handful of educational, self-sufficiency, and coaching classes virtually; however, attendance has been low. Some of these classes helped the clients apply for Medicaid and unemployment, which was one way they were able to cope with the rapid changes in quarantine surrounding financial and medical security.

II. Impact on the population served by *The Healing Center*

Overall, Covid-19 impacted those that attend The Healing Center by placing more strain on their lives, specifically in terms of financial instability, lack of resources at home, lack of public health information resources in multiple languages, lack of access to transportation, and mental health.

The population that utilizes the services of The Healing Center seemed to be disproportionately affected financially by the pandemic. Many of them were impacted by unemployment, in addition to other obstacles that indirectly impact their ability to work and obtain an income. With school systems switching to virtual options, many guests of The Healing Center were now forced to find options for childcare. This either limited their options for work or created an additional financial burden for these individuals. In-person childcare courses reopened in August, which has eased this worry.

Additionally, a large portion of the population of guests at The Healing Center are Latinos and non-English speakers. The Healing Center had expressed concern that these guests do not have equal access to reliable public health information in their own language and depend largely on word of mouth to stay updated on the latest Covid-19 announcements, which lent itself to misinformation. This indicated a potential opportunity for improvement in the creation and distribution of public health information to this population.

Furthermore, many guests at The Healing Center did not have reliable access to private transportation. Many who had previously relied on public transportation were now hesitant to use public transit due to safety concerns about transmission of Covid-19 from bus drivers or other passengers. Others had relied on caseworkers for transportation to and from The Healing Center in order to secure services there. However, many organizations began to prohibit their employees from transporting clients in their personal vehicles due to concerns for their health related to Covid-19. All of these changes magnified existing barriers for these guests, making it even more difficult to secure the assistance they needed.

Finally, The Healing Center serves as a place of connection and vital human interaction for its guests. While the organization had found ways to continue to serve the physical needs of its clients, a significant concern were the lost interpersonal and emotional connections that could not be replicated virtually. These factors were crucial to the mental well-being of the guests that used The Healing Center. Without the ability to gather, a vital part of The Healing Center's mission as a community center was negatively impacted.

III. How physicians and medical students can advocate for the community

Due to the current social restraints from Covid-19, volunteers at The Healing Center have decreased by approximately 65%. This has created a lack of workforce that has severely hampered attempts to re-establish programs and resources originally offered prior to Covid-19. The Healing Center has attempted to recruit more volunteers, but they are still not at the workforce capacity they would like to be. This creates an opportunity for students to spread awareness about the volunteer shortage. They could do so by creating social media posts for their classmates and people in the community to see.

With an increase in awareness, the workforce at The Healing Center and its Student Run Free Clinic could be increased. Recruiting of students and community physicians as volunteers would allow them to take direction in serving the community's needs. Students in particular can take an active role in investigating the community's needs by surveying the guests that frequent The Healing Center. Direct action can have a positive impact on the community, as volunteers can create relationships with the guests and better understand their needs.

Time is a resource difficult to come by in the doctor's office, and the Student Run Free Clinic at The Healing Center is no exception. It is a limiting factor in many aspects of care for patients, especially those not included in routine and expected patient visits. In the context of hurried doctors and office schedules, advocacy is often placed on the back burner in favor of other urgent matters which are more tangible and short-term. However, assigning a team to compile quick links that could be used to engage in advocacy could greatly increase the number of doctors participating. The same is true for patients, who would be able to advocate for policies directly affecting them. Having to find lawmakers' contact information can seem daunting and present a significant barrier for many, especially those who are unable to access the internet. Therefore, a printed resource with a how-to manual for reaching lawmakers would facilitate advocacy in healthcare.

Physicians are uniquely poised to interact with other healthcare professionals in order to improve the care of their patients in this unprecedented environment. Team-based care is a hallmark of quality patient interactions and outcomes, and during the Covid-19 crisis, it is important to join forces and create networks that patients can easily navigate and utilize. Interprofessional events and forums would be beneficial to link the resources of multiple medical modalities, such as physicians, pharmacists, and social workers. With regard to The Healing Center, many dedicated professionals with unique talents and areas of expertise can be harnessed to improve patient advocacy. Currently, The Healing Center benefits from having a small cohort of physicians providing care, but the network can be expanded to involve more of

the medical community. Social workers, pharmacists, and medical students would prove invaluable as an extension of The Healing Center's healthcare network.

The determinants of health affecting The Healing Center are the factors in the community that impede access to care. As advocates for healthcare, we must remain vigilant in how the quarantine is affecting these determinants and work to improve the quality of care of The Healing Center. One particular issue that requires attention is the lack of availability of updated Covid-19 guidelines to non-English speaking residents. Due to the novelty of the situation, guidelines concerning the expectations of the community have been changing in recent months. For non-English speaking residents living in large communities, such as the Latino-American population, these constant changes have been very difficult to navigate, making them largely susceptible to the virus. By staying informed in how the determinants of health of The Healing Center have been affected by Covid-19, we can improve their quality of care through increased access to information.