Health Caring: physical and mental health offer a long-term prescription for success

The medical realities of homelessness and poverty are something many people never think about. But we understand that people can’t sustainably rebuild their lives if their resources are being devoured by serious medical, dental or mental-health issues.

That’s why our work always begins with caring. That means providing basics like food, shelter and clothing. But it also means supporting the physical and emotional well-being of the people we serve. You might call it health caring.

We understand that overwhelming medical debt can send a low-income family into homelessness.

We realize that uncorrected vision problems and painful abscessed teeth can stop a youth from succeeding in school.

We know that an infected wound that won’t heal because of the cold, damp or heat of the streets can make it impossible for a woman to get a good job that will help her turn her life around.

Every day our staff works with organizations and volunteer professionals from a variety of disciplines to improve the health and stability of those we serve.

Generous dentists and optometrists provide free clinics for low-income youth in North Idaho. A volunteer nurse practitioner cares for street youth at Crosswalk teen shelter (read her story on page 2). Our staff makes sure formerly homeless veterans get to all their VA appointments.

Regular check-ups from a nurse have reduced ER visits among women staying at Hope House’s emergency shelter. A massage therapist volunteers regularly at our shelters to help reduce stress for our clients and we connect people with mental-health and substance-abuse treatment whenever necessary.

Last year, we partnered with Christ’s Clinic, Women’s Hearth, St. Joseph’s Family Center and Catholic Charities to find “health homes” matching our clients with primary care doctors and mental health providers who can centralize their health care and medical histories. (continued on back cover)
Diana first walked through the doors at Crosswalk teen shelter on a sunny April afternoon in 2011. She had no idea at the time that we’d been waiting for someone just like her. Crosswalk was in desperate need of a medical volunteer to evaluate kids and help them determine what care they needed.

“Kids would wait until they were really hurting and then go to the E.R. or a random clinic and wait for hours to be seen and often give up without getting help,” recalls shelter director Stephen Miller, “We really needed someone here on the front lines. Then Diana walked in out of the blue. It was a miracle.”

You see, Diana is a nurse practitioner. Complications of Multiple Sclerosis forced her to give up her position at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Chewelah, but she wasn’t ready to give up her license—or her desire to help others. As a mother of eight, she loved the idea of helping youth.

Diana has been coming to Crosswalk every Wednesday afternoon for the past two years, offering health care and health advice to the homeless youth who use the shelter and its services.

“My first day volunteering, when I arrived there was already a client waiting for me,” says Diana. “The shelter has so many services in a really compact space but they created a separate clinic area where I had privacy with the kids. I was so glad to be helping right out of the blue. It was a miracle.”

Diana took that spirit to heart and immediately went to work finding medical supplies to stock the new Crosswalk clinic. She forged a partnership with the Department of Health, gathered donations and even bought supplies out of her own pocket.

She went to work, helping kids identify their medical needs and learn to take better care of themselves. Cases of scabies and lice disappeared entirely and other medical and hygiene issues common among homeless and street youth were properly dealt with.

In addition to individual consultations, she made opportunities to educate both kids and staff about healthy eating, exercise and preventative health measures.

Because she is always willing to go the extra mile, Diana offers more than just health care. She offers the kind of simple caring that creates a safe place for kids to go anytime they are in need.

“She creates connections with the kids who need help,” explains Stephen. “It allows them to feel open and comfortable. She makes it safe for them to really express all of their needs and makes sure they receive the proper treatment.”

“She sticks with every kid—even if they are stubborn or uncooperative at first,” says Stephen. “She does everything she can to make sure kids get the treatment they need. She explains every step of the process so they know what to expect. When a kid needs to go elsewhere for further medical attention, Diana even calls ahead to make sure someone is waiting for them so they don’t feel forgotten or give up and leave before they can be seen.”

“Diana’s helpful nature has made a massive impact here,” says Stephen. “Before she started there was a very large gap with the amount of health care that each kid was receiving and seeking. Diana has created real change here. She has bridged that gap.”

Every week, Diana makes the lives of Crosswalk kids better by handing out band-aids and sound advice. But she also saves lives—catching an early case of breast cancer and solving other life threatening issues.

“These kids deserve adequate health care,” responds Diana. “There are some large misconceptions about why kids at Crosswalk are homeless. I think people feel it’s the fault of the kid, when in reality that largely isn’t the case. I see them doing what they can in a bad situation.”

“You have to realize that they are children in circumstances where they need to make adult decisions. There is no adult figure telling them what to do. It’s up to them to make mature decisions about their life and their health without any experience behind the matter. I’m here because I want to offer them my skills and experience to help in any way I can. I’m just here to encourage them to help themselves, not only medically, but in all aspects of the rest of their lives.” Read the stories of other amazing volunteers at www.voaspokane.org/VolunteerStories.
Thank you for remembering “I Remember Mama”

Thanks to your gifts, Mother’s Day was magical for 140 low-income seniors who would have otherwise spent the day alone. This year’s Teddy Bear Picnic themed luncheon was one of the most joyful events we’ve ever had.

Your sponsorships allowed these women the luxury of gifts, companionship, entertainment and a delicious lunch at the Red Lion Hotel at the Park. Each woman in attendance was deeply grateful for your generosity.

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Recently we have ventured into two programs helping homeless individuals as they are released from the hospital. No one should have to recover from a hospital stay on the pavement of an underpass.

That’s why our H3 program—partnership with the City of Spokane, Empire Health Foundation, Spokane County Medical Society and Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center—helps to find housing for homeless individuals when they are released to go home from the hospital.

For those well enough to leave the hospital, but not stable enough to live on their own, we have joined forces with the Providence Health Services Foundation to create two respite beds where homeless women can recuperate in a safe, clean environment under the supervision of visiting nurses.

These programs are primarily about caring for our region’s most vulnerable by giving individuals their best chance for long-term success. But they are also about using resources wisely—if care is unavailable or delayed, those in the most need end up sicker and require the most costly care. That’s bad for patients and costly for hospitals, insurance companies and public assistance programs, therefore all of us. Our programs and services save lives while saving money. That’s good for our community.

In the long run, your dollars provide the most good when we can stabilize homeless and impoverished people. Healing the entire person is at the core of the life changing work you support every day. Learn more about our programs and services at www.voaspokane.org/programs.