

MMC-Preble Street Learning Collaborative Opens Its Doors to Care for Portland's Homeless

This month the MMC-Preble Street Learning Collaborative (the Collaborative) opened its doors at 20 Portland Street in Portland. A two-year project in the making, the Collaborative is a program designed in close collaboration with MMC Homeless Health Partners to bridge identified gaps in health care services for Portland's homeless population, and will aim to achieve three main goals:

- Help improve health of at-risk homeless patients
- Demonstrate the effect of a population-based approach to health care for at-risk homeless patients, and
- Assure the future education of future physicians focusing on health care disparities

The Collaborative's new 8,400 square-foot home was renovated from a previous clinic to now include three exam rooms, a reception area, a consultation room, dedicated "learner space" for residents and medical students, two fully accessible showers, conference rooms and office spaces.

The program was initiated following the annual Graduate Medical Education (GME) retreat, where Maine Medical Center (MMC) senior faculty encouraged residency program directors to look at new ways of learning—in settings outside of the hospital—that will better prepare a graduating resident to practice medicine in their specialty, achieve the Triple Aim, and address health disparities.

Dr. Peter Bates, Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs and Chief Academic Officer at Maine Medical Center, helped move the project from concept to operation along with critical assistance from Katy Kruithoff RN, MS, Project Manager with MMC's Department of Medical Education and several MMC staff and community stakeholders.

"Medical students really provided a strong push and encouragement from the beginning," said Bates, of the Collaborative's inception "Through their curriculum—and because of who they are as people—they built a strong interest in the homeless population and raised important questions encouraging participation in helping the underserved."

That collective interest was shared strongly among residents, many of whom had specific interests, both professionally and personally, for addressing health care disparities. The residents and students were quickly identified as a strong base of learners who were passionate about doing work connected to their educational experience at MMC.

"Healthcare disparities had not been a strong part of the educational curriculum to date – most education focuses on taking care of the sick person in front of you, not traditionally thinking about the community of people you don't see," said Bates of the challenge that led to the building of the program. "Addressing disparities and equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to help in their career is really important from an educational standpoint."

MMC's Education and MMC Research and Preble Street—a Portland based social service agency—have developed a strong working relationship in coordinating care for Portland's underserved population.

Preble Street was founded in 1975 as a neighborhood center to engage and empower homeless and low-income residents. Over time, the center evolved to become a partnership of private and public agencies working together to meet the immediate and long-term needs of the homeless and low-income residents of Greater Portland. According to the city of Portland, 422 people per night, on average, spent the night in city shelters in May 2016.

One of the benefits of the program is bringing health care and social services together. Preble Street provides a vast array of community services—such as housing assistance, insurance and other important services to the community. Preble Street leaders Mark Swann (Executive Director) and Donna Yellen (Chief Program Officer) at Preble Street were instrumental in helping to move the Collaborative forward.

“Preble Street is very excited about this new partnership with MMC. Together we can fill gaps in the health care system, that in the past, have left far too many of our clients without medical treatment,” says Swann. “People are very vulnerable on the streets and in shelters, and doing anti-poverty work today is more challenging than ever before, so putting together this new program with such a highly respected institution as MMC is the best news we’ve had in some time.”

Maine, one of 19 states to decline Medicaid expansion, has experienced significant curtailment of funding for homeless initiatives at state and municipal levels. Most of Portland’s homeless population are uninsured, either ineligible for MaineCare (Maine Medicaid) or coverage through the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Other than hospital emergency departments, there is limited walk-in, same day non-emergency health-services access for this target population. The Long Stay Intervention Workgroup at MMC conservatively estimates 1,481 avoidable hospital days in 2015.

The Collaborative intends to increase access to safe patient-centered care by engaging vulnerable and homeless clients in an established, patient-centered medical home. Improving communication and care-coordination between community agencies, social service and health care providers will help achieve that goal.

That shared collaboration was evident as the program became a realization through a close partnership between MMC, Preble Street and key Portland community partners including Greater Portland Health, Mercy Hospital, the City of Portland, Intermed and the Veteran’s Administration of Maine.

Significant financial commitments have been made by Maine Medical Center and Preble Street to initiate the project. In addition to this funding, the MMC-PHO (now MaineHealth ACO) provided a \$50K grant through its regional Value Oversight Committee (VOC) to help with the development.

Dr. Jeff Aalberg, Chief Medical Officer at the ACO described the criteria for the grant application.

“First and foremost, we wanted to be sure that the project we would award funding to was an innovative and patient-centered initiative with a sustainable outcome that aligns with our organization’s mission,” said Aalberg. “The Collaborative represents a part of the health system reaching out to a population that is largely overlooked in the traditional health care system. We need to do more work like this with different varieties of community-based organizations. This is a great way to deliver health care to Portland’s underserved.”

Epic, a privately held software company, also provided support through two grants, which, in addition to the PHO grant were critical in helping with planning and facility enhancement work.

The Collaborative is situated within a one- to two-block radius of many community services focusing on low-income and homeless populations and will serve as the “hook and hub” for low-barrier access to health services, care coordination services and education. This systems-based, community-led approach will create a new point of entry to the health system.

The Collaborative will partner closely with Homeless Health Partners to help seek out and enroll members who need assistance and will ensure their needs are fully catalogued. This will also help provide them with the care and coordinated services they need most.

The immediate focus will be on providing specific services—such as mental health and addiction medicine—that are challenging to homeless patients who are discharged from the hospital with complex care needs.

The Collaborative, which officially opened its doors on January 17, will staff a Nurse Practitioner in addition to residents from the program areas of Psychiatry, Family Medicine and Internal Medicine, with a goal of expanding services to every residency program within the next year or two.

“Fewer people will be homeless and those who are will have better health and fewer hospitalizations that can be avoided with proactive healthcare,” said Dr. Bates when asked to describe what success would look like for The Collaborative. “If we can help do this work— it’s a wonderful outcome for our community.” •