Help Desk: A Student-Led Initiative to Address Social Determinants of Health in Durham, N.C.

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Overview

Social and environmental factors like food insecurity and unstable housing account for 70% of health outcomes. Most health systems, however, are not fully integrated with community and social services to manage patients’ social needs. Student volunteers, eager for meaningful clinical experiences, are an untapped resource that health systems can better leverage to improve integrated patient care. Our team is partnering with Lincoln Community Health Center to launch a student “Help Desk.” As a federally qualified health center, Lincoln cares for a vulnerable population—patients who are uninsured, low-income, and medically underserved.

Why Students?

Evidence-based interventions can take up to 17 years to be adopted as standard practice. Students can form implementation teams to accelerate the uptake of innovations—like the Help Desk model.

The Innovation: Help Desk Model

- Lincoln behavioral health team screens patients for unmet social needs
- Lincoln behavioral health team refers patients to community resources
- Student volunteers make follow-up calls to connect patients with resources

Similar Help Desk models have been implemented successfully across the country. This summer, we visited Help Desk sites in California to identify volunteer best practices.

Logic Model

Inputs | Activities | Outputs | Short Term Outcomes | Medium Term Outcomes | Long Term Outcomes
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Help Desk as an official student organization | Recruit and train student volunteers | # of volunteers recruited, trained, and retained | Improve patients’ understanding of referral & services; improve patients’ self-efficacy with using community resources | Improved patient health outcomes |
Lincoln Behavioral Health Team | Build REDCap Database | # of patients called & who answered at 2/4 week follow ups | | |
Duke Center for Personalized Health Care | Volunteers conduct follow-up calls and outcome assessments with patients | # of patients who previously used community resources | | |
Grant funding, Physical resources | Volunteers manage and maintain local community resource directory | # of services initiated after a follow-up call | | |

Implementation Framework

Adapted Framework | Example Activities
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Monitor Lincoln patient health and social needs & diagnose areas for service delivery improvement | Collect/analyze baseline data on Lincoln patients
Build partnerships with community stakeholders | Attend Partnership for a Healthy Durham meetings
Develop policies and infrastructure to implement Help Desk | Draft volunteer workflows; recruit & train volunteers; build REDCap platform for follow-up documentation; host kickoff meeting with Lincoln
Assure competent workforce | Host weekly meetings with volunteer base; identify next cohort of student leaders
Evaluate program effectiveness & research for new insights | Administer feedback surveys to volunteers/Lincoln team; review of Help Desk model best practices

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