

Sight and Sole: Partnering to Enhance the Health of the New Britain Homeless

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Abstract

Nursing faculty with expertise in community health are well poised to introduce nursing students to the rewarding experience of caring for vulnerable populations. Multiple partnerships have been established over the years within the central Connecticut region that have benefited both the university's nursing students and the affiliated agency, as well as the individuals served. Utilizing knowledge related to the common health issues faced by the homeless population, faculty worked with community partners to discuss needs and create a plan involving nursing students, which specifically focused on vision and foot health.

Keywords: homeless, vision health, foot health, nursing, community partnerships



Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) is a public university located in New Britain, Connecticut. The university enrolls about 12,000 students and is richly diverse, with more than 30% of students being persons of color. The university offers 100 majors at the undergraduate level and approximately 40 fields of study at the graduate level. CCSU boasts four elements of distinction: international education, workforce and state economic development, interdisciplinary studies and cross-curricular initiatives, and community engagement (CCSU, 2019a). Recognizing the current widespread importance of community connections and academia, CCSU has established an Office of Community Engagement. This office “seeks to engage the CCSU campus community in projects and outreach that are mutually beneficial, contribute to the greater good, and build a sense of civic responsibility” (CCSU, 2019b, para. 1). The mayor of the city has enthusiastically recognized the university’s commitment to community engagement, working closely with the president of the university to build and sustain a strong partnership.

New Britain is a city with a proud history and rich in diversity, having a population of approximately 72,000 with a high percent-

age (43.3%) of Hispanics. Approximately 21.7% of the residents live below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Like many cities, New Britain struggles with homelessness. Although the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in New Britain is hard to accurately determine, a point in time count held in January 2018 by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness indicated that there were 161 of these individuals in the city (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, 2018). The city of New Britain has recently renewed its long-time commitment to end homelessness through the Building Hope Together initiative. The work in this area concentrates on three goals. One of the three goals recognizes the importance of wellness in this complex equation, specifically focusing on “assessing individual need, providing access to care, and linking community partners.” (City of New Britain, 2018, slide 5). CCSU’s Office of Community Engagement is an identified community partner in this aggressive work plan (City of New Britain, 2018).

The homeless population remains one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Adults experiencing homelessness generally have more compromised physical and mental health and a shorter life span than the general public (Taylor et al., 2016).

Health disparities in these individuals are well documented in the literature. People without homes are particularly at risk for the following conditions: diabetes, hepatitis, asthma, substance abuse, depression (Taylor et al., 2016), chronic pain, food insecurity (Moore et al., 2019), and intimate partner violence (Vijayaraghavan et al., 2012). Individuals experiencing homelessness most commonly self-report headaches, hypertension, arthritis, back pain, neurological disorders, and hypercholesterolemia (Arnold et al., 2020).

Individuals experiencing homelessness frequently take multiple medications for multiple illnesses, particularly antihypertensives and diabetic medications. Unfortunately, lack of health insurance is associated with poor management of illness in this population (Asgary et al., 2016). Many medical conditions common to this group require specialty care, which is often inaccessible, and inability to pay is very often a barrier to care among those who are homeless (Arnold, et al., 2020). Healthcare for those experiencing homelessness is commonly obtained in hospital emergency departments. At times, medications and treatments may be stolen or traded for drugs, food, or cash (Hauff & Secor-Turner, 2014).

A large national study on health needs of this population revealed that 73% of adults experiencing homelessness recounted one or more unmet health needs, and 32% were not able to receive necessary medical or surgical treatment (Baggett, O'Connell, Singer, & Rigotti, 2010). Homelessness is a prolonged experience for many. With increased duration of this situation, individuals have less access to healthcare and subsequently a lack of access to necessary medications (Paudyal et al., 2017). Complex comorbidities and lack of access to healthcare accounted for high mortality rates and health disparities among this population (Plumb, 2000).

Although the literature on homelessness is extensive, the ocular health of individuals experiencing homelessness remains undetermined. Noel et al. (2015) examined the unmet eye care needs in this population and found that, of those participating in screening, approximately one third had one or more visual abnormalities. Since visual acuity is strongly correlated with well-being and earning potential, identification and correction of compromised vision can

have significant socioeconomic benefits for those experiencing homelessness. These individuals indeed desire visual screening (Noel et al., 2015). Providing this screening along with filled prescriptions for glasses can enhance the well-being and overall quality of life in this particular population.

In addition to ocular health, “compared to housed individuals across studies, homeless individuals were more likely to have foot problems including: tinea pedis, foot pain, functional limitations with walking and improperly fitting shoes” (To et al., 2016, para. 3). Up to two thirds of people experiencing homelessness report concerns with their feet. Although foot problems in this population have been well documented, these health issues are commonly overlooked and treated inadequately. Poor hygiene, lack of access to clean and well-fitting socks and shoes, as well as inadequate financial resources, contribute to foot problems (Chen et al., 2012). Walking is the most common mode of transportation for individuals without a home and, therefore, immobility can have a significant impact on lifestyle and well-being. Given the significant impact of foot problems, screening for and treating foot problems in those who are homeless could result in better overall health and improved social outcomes.

In an attempt to conform to a university priority of being a more effective steward of central Connecticut, in fall 2017 the university Faculty Senate Community Engagement Committee announced a grant opportunity to further support community-focused initiatives. A request for proposals was created, open to all academic departments. Proposals were reviewed and funding was awarded in spring 2018. Two faculty members from the Department of Nursing were awarded a \$2,500 grant. The grant, titled “Sight to Sole; Partnering to Enhance the Health of the New Britain Homeless,” sought to engage nursing students with individuals experiencing homelessness in the New Britain area to positively impact the health of this local population, with a specific focus on vision and foot care. The project included four primary goals:

1. Improving the health of the homeless population in New Britain by providing interventions which enhance vision and foot health of homeless individuals.
2. Providing opportunities for students to engage in service-learning activi-

- ties that include critical reflection and potential for personal growth.
3. Enhancing student understanding of social determinants of health so that they may be better able to advocate to eliminate health disparities.
 4. Exemplifying the commitment to community engagement as defined by the Carnegie Foundation plan by fostering relationships with several community partners.

Overview of the Project

Nursing faculty with expertise in community health are well poised to introduce nursing students to the rewarding experience of caring for vulnerable populations. Multiple partnerships have been established over the years within the central Connecticut region that have benefited both the university's nursing students and the affiliated agency, in addition to the individuals served. Utilizing knowledge related to the common health issues confronted by those faced with homelessness, faculty worked with community partners to discuss needs and create a plan involving nursing students, which specifically focused on vision and foot health.

The Friendship Service Center (FSC) is a major organization serving individuals impacted by homelessness in the city of New Britain; it has a long history of serving the New Britain community. Established in 1968, the center has grown considerably and currently provides multiple programs to meet the many needs of this population (Friendship Service Center, 2017). The Department of Nursing has had a long-standing relationship with this agency. In past years, nursing students have conducted health fairs, volunteered to serve meals, distributed winter clothing, and conducted blood pressure and diabetes screening at the center. An inquiry email was sent to the FSC program director providing information on the grant, as well as an overview of some of the preliminary ideas for the project that were generated by the nursing department faculty. An enthusiastic reply was received, and plans were made to meet with both the program director and the residential supervisor to discuss the proposed vision and foot screenings. During the meeting, FSC staff were extremely receptive to the event and provided helpful information about optimal time to schedule the event, publicity, and

logistics for station setup and patient flow. Documentation of support and detailed plans for the event were included in the grant proposal. After notification that the grant was awarded, faculty were in frequent contact via email with staff in the weeks leading up to the event as details were finalized. The FSC staff were also supportive and appreciative of the plan for program evaluation via survey and expressed an interest in sharing results with their board of directors.

The Department of Nursing has also had a long-standing relationship with the New Britain Lions club. Nursing students have worked extensively with the Lions over the years to assist with vision screenings at many events in the city. Similar to the process described above, leaders from the Lions club were emailed prior to writing the grant to determine interest in participation. Because the Lions club often provides vision screenings at community locations, such as schools and veterans' events, they were well poised to set up their mobile vision screening at the homeless shelter. After confirming availability with the Lions optometrist, our contact person at the Lions responded very positively to the initial inquiry and committed to the event. Once the grant was awarded, faculty were in close communication with the Lions regarding setup needs in terms of space, supplies, and student assistance. It was determined that individuals needing additional formal vision testing would have appointments scheduled at the freestanding city eye clinic and that grant funds would be utilized to purchase new eyeglasses for those in need. The Lions club was also aware of and supportive of the plan to evaluate the event in terms of participant and student impact.

The last partner in this project was foot care providers. In order to deliver safe and effective foot care, trained health professionals were sought out through networking and word of mouth. After conducting research on certified foot care nurses in the area, a nurse who specialized in foot care was contacted to see if she would be interested in assisting. A successful meeting was held to provide an overview of the project, discuss needed supplies, and determine the role students could play in assisting with the foot care. Because of the lack of certified foot care nurses in the area, two podiatry residents affiliated with a local hospital were also contacted. After learning about

the purpose of the project, all foot care specialists agreed to assist with this aspect of care at the shelter event. Their support was included in the grant proposal. Once the grant was awarded, the faculty were in close contact with the foot care providers during the time leading up to the events.

This initiative engaged members of the Student Nurses Association (SNA) as well as students in an Introduction to Nursing Theory course (Nursing 301). The SNA is committed to advocating for the health of local and national communities and seeks out opportunities to actively engage the community through volunteer service, health enhancement, and education. The SNA is predominantly composed of undergraduate prelicensure nursing students. Nursing 301 is one of the initial courses in the university's RN to BSN program. In this course, students study several nursing theories. Each particular theory is examined, evaluated, and applied to the health of individuals, families, and communities. Students study nursing theorists' conceptual models of health, illness, and wellness. Students craft their personal philosophy of nursing (grounded in nursing theory) and subsequently carry out a health promotion initiative in a setting of their choice based on their chosen nursing theory. Students from both the SNA and Nursing 301 were invited to participate in the Sight to Sole events.

Two events were planned and executed in fall 2018. The events occurred in the dining room at the homeless shelter and were promoted to individuals temporarily living in the shelter's transitional housing unit. An evening time slot was chosen, immediately after the dinner meal was served, in order to maximize availability of interested individuals. The event was advertised through word of mouth and through flyers distributed in the building. Further interest was fostered by the program director and by the residential supervisor.

Members of the Lions club and the foot care providers arrived early to set up equipment and orient students assisting with services. A registration station was created where interested individuals could learn more about what was being offered at the event and sign up for vision screening and/or foot care. A childcare station was also established, staffed by a student and supplied with crayons, puzzles, and games, for any children accompanying a parent at the

event.

The vision screenings were conducted by students along with a licensed optometrist who is a member of the Lions club and volunteered his services for the event. Snellen testing was performed first to assess basic visual acuity. Machines were then used to screen for increased intraocular pressure and peripheral visual deficits, which can assess glaucoma risk. After these tests were completed, participants were screened with a nonmydriatic camera, which captured a photo of their retina and optic nerve. These images were reviewed by the optometrist, along with results from the previous screening tests, and a plan of care was established. Individuals needing reading glasses were given a free pair by the optometrist. Individuals needing additional formalized testing were referred to the eye clinic for additional evaluation at no cost. An arrangement was made for those needing prescription eyeglasses to have the cost covered by grant funds.

Comprehensive foot care services were offered. Individuals wanting foot care initially received a warm foot soak. The soak was followed by a thorough foot assessment, nail clipping, and callus removal if needed. Lotion was applied to calves and feet and all individuals were given three pairs of clean white socks. If an individual needed additional medical attention related to their feet, they were referred to the medical provider who visits the shelter on a weekly basis.

During the event, participants had the opportunity to socialize and relax, while enjoying refreshments and conversation with the students. A dessert table was set up where participants could make a yogurt and fresh fruit parfait if they so desired. At another table, participants were encouraged to stop and receive additional verbal education and written handouts related to vision and eye care prior to leaving the event. Small gift bags were assembled ahead of time containing nail clippers, lotion, antifungal powder, and nail files, all purchased with grant funds. Each participant received a gift bag when finished with the services.

Impact of the Project

A plan was developed to evaluate the impact of the project in terms of its four major goals. In order to evaluate Goal 1, improving the health of the homeless population in New Britain by providing interventions

which enhance vision and foot health of homeless individuals, data would be collected on numbers served, amount and type of screenings conducted, and referrals generated by the event. Goal 2 was to provide opportunities for students to engage in service-learning activities that included critical reflection and potential for personal growth. Plans were made to promote the events among students, solicit interest, and collect data on the number of student participants and placement in the program. In order to meet Goal 3, enhance student understanding of social determinants of health so that they may be better able to advocate to eliminate health disparities, participating students were asked to journal about the experience guided by several predetermined questions. Faculty researchers planned to conduct an analysis of the journals to determine to what extent this goal was met. Goal 4 was to exemplify the commitment to community engagement as defined by the Carnegie Foundation plan by fostering relationships with several community partners. The plan for evaluation of this goal was to solicit feedback from partners, share results through the community engagement program on campus, and disseminate details about the event for replication through presentations and publications.

Faculty also wished to get feedback from participants to assess their satisfaction with the quality of services and the care provided. Prior to the first event, the institutional review board (IRB) approval process was initiated in order to conduct a simple survey of participants. In preparation for formal IRB submission, the homeless shelter was approached to first gain support for the exit survey, which was granted and endorsed in the form of a gatekeeper letter. The IRB application was reviewed by the university IRB committee, and permission to survey participants was granted.

In order to assess the impact on students, students who attended the events were asked to journal about their experience and respond to specific questions related to personal reflection. IRB approval was also granted for this component of the evaluation. Students were told that participation was optional. Informed consent was obtained for those wishing to participate.

Students choosing to participate in the evaluation process were asked to answer the following questions:

1. Did you have preliminary presumptions about working with homeless clients? If so, please describe. How have your ideas changed, as a result of your service?
2. Describe how this learning experience provided opportunities for you to incorporate knowledge from your courses thus far.
3. Did this service-learning experience change your attitude about volunteerism in a positive or negative way? Explain your answer.
4. Through this experience, do you think you made a contribution to the individuals at the FSC? Why or why not? Describe your level of involvement, any collaborations that you had with others and the accomplishments of your actions.
5. What are some important points that you learned from this experience? Please add anything else you would like to share.

Community partner feedback was also recognized as an important aspect of this project. Plans were made to discuss the events with the partners from the FSC, the Lions club, and the foot care providers after the events ended in order to better understand what worked well and what could be improved upon for future events of this nature. The nursing instructors also planned to meet after each event to evaluate the event and modify various aspects as needed.

Findings

Goal 1: Improve the health of the homeless population in New Britain by providing interventions which enhance vision and foot health of homeless individuals

A total of 27 individuals (15 women and 12 men) ages 23–75 received care over the course of the two evening events. The mean age was 47.6 (SD 15.5). Additional demographic information, such as the presence of diabetes or hypertension, was also collected on the 27 individuals who attended both events. A total of 25 (92.6%) individuals chose to receive vision screening. Of these, 21 individuals (84%) were referred to the eye clinic for an in-depth evaluation and/or new eyeglass prescription. A total of 13 individuals received comprehensive foot

Table 1. Sight to Sole Event Demographic Data (N = 27)

Gender	n	%
Male	15	55.6
Female	12	44.4
Age		
20–29	6	22.2
30–39	4	14.8
40–49	2	7.4
50–59	9	33.3
60–69	4	14.8
70–79	2	7.4
Reported Conditions		
Diabetes	4	14.8
Hypertension	10	37
Vision Issues	19	70.3
Foot Issues	10	37
Services Received		
Vision Screening	25	92.6
Foot Care	13	48.1
<i>Note: Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.</i>		

care and nail clipping. See Table 1 for demographic data. One individual required a referral to the medical provider who attends the shelter on a weekly basis for a more in-depth foot evaluation and referral due to extremely ingrown and thick toenails. The vision screening and foot care services provided, as well as the referrals made, served to meet Goal 1 of this project. At the conclusion of the event, individuals were invited to complete a survey that used a Likert scale to evaluate their satisfaction with the vision screening, the foot care services, and their overall experience regarding the event. In general, participants receiving care identified high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the nursing students and healthcare providers. All participants reported that they were treated with respect during the event. Table 2 shows questions asked of the participants and their responses. Very positive informal feedback was also obtained by and through the staff at the shelter the day after the event and shared with faculty.

Goal 2: Provide opportunities for students to engage in service-learning activities that include critical reflection and potential for personal growth.

A total of 15 students participated in the two events. As previously noted, nursing students voluntarily journaled about their experiences providing care to the homeless. Students were able to use this opportunity to engage in self-reflection and applied concepts of nursing theory to the actual event. Journal quotes that capture this objective include the following:

“I reflected back to Nola Pender’s theory of health promotion and see how this is a perfect environment to use this theory. It is a supportive atmosphere to offer healthy meals, encourage self-care and promote good self-esteem.”

“The learning experience from attending the friendship center provided me an opportunity to provide care and serve people or the

Table 2. Sight to Sole Event Satisfaction Survey (N = 17)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I was greeted and made to feel welcome			17.6%	82.3%
The available services were explained to me			17.6%	82.3%
I was treated with respect during the event				100%
I learned helpful ways to care for my feet (if received foot services)*		16.6%		83.3%
I received information about my vision (if testing done)**			12.5%	87.5%
My questions were answered in ways I could understand			23.5%	76.4%
The students and staff seemed interested in my health and wellbeing			17.6%	82.3%
This event was worth my time			11.7%	88.2%
*6 responses **16 responses Note: Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.				

community as I learned from Jean Watson’s theory of transpersonal human caring in my class.”

“In my setting I used to assume they were all looking for food and a warm place to sleep. In my specialty I find that most homeless people are intoxicated, have mental health issues, or both. To some extent this is true however over the years I’ve seen enough people off the streets to know that not all of them fall into these categories. I think that spending time at The Friendship Center showed me even more so that seemingly ‘normal’ people can end up homeless for whatever reason, not necessarily from alcoholism, drug addiction, or mental illness.”

"Participating in this service to help the homeless community has been rewarding and positive. It changed my outlook and whole perspective on volunteerism in a positive way because it felt good to give back to the community and help those who

truly need it."

“My experience at the Friendship Center reinforced a positive attitude towards volunteerism. At the Friendship Center you could see the follow through and support of providing holistic care.”

“I did have some presumptions about working at the Friendship Center. I thought the facility would look more rundown and that the clients we were serving would not trust us, but to my surprise a lot of people wanted us to care for them. After working at the Friendship Center I realized that our service was wanted and appreciated by all who received our services. This was also a good learning experience from a course I am taking this semester as well. I have learned many different nursing theories this semester and from what I observed at the Friendship Center is that the Basic Need Theory still stands true today.”

Goal 3: Enhance student understanding of social determinants of health so that they may be better able to advocate to eliminate health disparities.

In addition to discussing how they applied classroom theory to this experience, nursing students also wrote about how small acts of kindness can serve to instill hope and trust in others. Concepts of social justice and vulnerability, as well as the importance of advocacy to enhance the health of others, were evident in their journals, all serving to meet Goal 3 of this project.

“The Friendship Center can help more homeless and assist families in finding permanent housing, jobs and help to navigate the system so they can get the temporary services they needed.”

“It is well known that homeless people are a diverse population who are more prone to physical and mental ill-health and who experience poorer engagement with health and health promotion services. Therefore, they are often missed by primary care health appointments due to lack of insurance or even access to primary health doctors.”

“Many of the clients that stay at this facility have trouble accessing healthcare. They lack any primary care and rather than wait for them to seek care on their own, this outreach program brings it to their doorstep. While it’s not definitive care, it opens up the door to get them to where they need to be. The health screenings help facilitate and promote health and well-being.”

“I feel like we all made enormous contributions to the residents at The Friendship Center. They could see the sincerity in our desire to help them and it uplifted them.”

“The one thing I found with every resident I came in contact with was their pleasure in having been helped, it was as if for once they could see some hope in their lives even if it’s for something as simple as getting a new pair of reading glasses. Every single one of them

smiled as they left our station.”

Goal 4: Exemplify the commitment to community engagement as defined by the Carnegie Foundation plan by fostering relationships with several community partners.

Carnegie defines community engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Driscoll, 2008, p. 39). This project linked CCSU with the New Britain community in mutually beneficial ways as described above, aligning well with this definition. All partners worked together with the faculty and students, demonstrating role flexibility in order to deliver care as a team. An exchange of knowledge and resources did in fact occur as a result of this project. Both the Lions club and the foot care specialists depended on the student volunteers to assist with the vision screenings and foot care services. Students learned important factors related to healthcare needs of the homeless as they prepared for this experience. They also gained knowledge and skills related to vision health and foot care practice as they worked alongside the optometrist and the foot care specialists. The shelter staff were happy to have services provided right in the shelter, as this made the specialized care delivery much more convenient. Participants received important health education information as they rotated through the various stations. Feedback from the Lions club members who attended the event, as well as the foot care specialists, was very positive. Shelter staff also confirmed their own high level of satisfaction with the event overall in terms of organization, services, student interactions, education, and supplies provided.

Implications of Early-Stage Assessment

Overall, faculty members believe this project was very successful on many levels. Aside from the positive outcomes shared above, there were numerous additional and unanticipated benefits. Nursing curriculum in particular is especially enhanced when community engagement activities are embedded into the program, as these experiences can serve as a significant means of integrating the American Association of

Colleges of Nursing (AACN) Baccalaureate learning outcomes. The AACN recognizes that an important role of the Bachelor of Science Nursing (BSN) program is to “determine and assess clinical sites to ensure the clinical experiences for students provide: patients from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and of differing gender, religious, and spiritual practices” (AACN, 2008, p. 35). The AACN also states that BSN programs should provide opportunities for students to advocate for social justice, including a commitment to the health of vulnerable populations, such as the homeless, and the elimination of health disparities. Programs such as the Sight to Sole program, which emphasizes health screening and health promotion, can play a small but significant role in addressing this need.

An unexpected benefit of this project was the mentoring process that occurred between the two levels of nursing students. This service-learning opportunity provided licensed RN students who were in Nursing 301 the opportunity to serve as leaders and mentors to the prelicensure nursing students in the SNA as the two groups worked side by side to deliver care, a unique arrangement not previously occurring in the program. Additional combined community engagement experiences such as this can serve to build strong collegial nursing relationships within the CCSU nursing community in addition to the local central Connecticut community.

This experience also served to bring classroom content and theory to life. In addition to the direct benefits for those experiencing homelessness, students applied theories of health promotion, illness, and wellness to the care of these individuals at the FSC. The students utilized the health promotion model to provide health education and screening, specifically vision screening and foot care. Rather than simply learning about health promotion from class lectures, these students actively applied the theory of health promotion by fostering optimal health in the homeless population through education and health screenings at the FSC while applying important therapeutic communication techniques and empathy to the encounters.

Next Steps

Although this was not a large-scale project, the activity did serve to meet the stated

goals. This project has great potential in terms of impact on future students, as well as individuals served. Plans are currently under way to hold an additional event where the main focus will be on foot care, as the majority of individuals already had undergone vision screening and recently received referral information. Faculty are also hoping to plan a future event that focuses on holistic care, where services such as massages and a yoga class can be combined with education regarding positive stress management techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and simple meditation.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is recognized as a critical aspect in achieving positive health outcomes (Jakubowski & Perron, 2018). The potential to collaborate with other disciplines at the university is promising and exciting. Departments in the fields of social work, exercise science, and psychology, for example, would be excellent partners to collaborate with on further initiatives.

The positive outcomes of this project will be used to foster enthusiasm for future events at the local level. The benefits of this community engagement activity will be shared with other faculty members at the university, where involved nursing faculty members serve as a resource for others who may be interested in organizing such events to assist the homeless in the surrounding community. In addition, the project and outcomes will be disseminated at national nurse educator conferences so that other schools of nursing can look to create opportunities such as these to benefit both their students and their communities.

To keep the project momentum moving forward, faculty members plan to apply for additional grant funding through the Faculty Senate Community Engagement Committee as well as the university's grants department to obtain local community funding (community engagement grants are offered annually). Although all health-related screenings are valued, the shelter expressed a significant need for ongoing foot care clinics. Additional grant awards may therefore be used to hire a certified foot care specialist nurse. Faculty have also considered applying for a professional development grant, offered yearly, for a member of the nursing department to become a certified foot care specialist nurse through the American Foot Care Nurses Association (AFCNA). Certified foot care specialist nurses remain in high

demand in Connecticut, as evidenced by the AFCNA website, which as of this writing listed only three local practitioners in the entire state (<https://www.afcna.org/FindFootCareNurse?&tab=1>). Having a trained faculty member who could offer the ongoing services free of cost would truly enhance long-term sustainability of this project.

The participation of the Lions club, which offers the services at no cost, and continued involvement of nursing students in the RN and RN to BSN programs also serves to promote long-term sustainability of the Sight to Sole project. Nursing faculty will continue to recruit students from academic classes and the Student Nurses Association. Students have the opportunity to engage in the community through social justice and clinical nursing. Individuals experiencing homelessness will receive foot care, vision screenings, and health education at no cost. The Sight to Sole project has ongoing potential to provide valuable outcomes for the students and faculty of the Department of Nursing, the university, and the community at large.

Lessons Learned

Overall, this project aligned well with the university's commitment to having a positive impact on the surrounding community. The homeless shelter staff reported that this was a valuable service delivered in a convenient manner and indicated that they would welcome future projects such as this. Faculty were thrilled to learn that interactions with the students and providers were rated as extremely caring and respectful by the individuals receiving services. It was discovered that community partners such as the Lions club are eager to assist in projects such as these, as they align well with their mission to "support the efforts of Lions clubs and partners in serving communities locally and globally, giving hope and impacting lives through humanitarian service programs and grants" (Lions Clubs International, n.d., para 1).

Having two separate events was beneficial in that the first event offered an opportunity to determine what worked and what did not. As a result, the second event ran

more smoothly than the first. For example, the lighting for one of the eye screeners was not optimal for the optometrist in the first event: The screening needed to be held in a darker environment. This issue was communicated to shelter staff, and special arrangements were made to relocate the nonmydriatic camera for the second event. Faculty also realized that a few more students were needed for the second event in order to place one student per station, with two additional students assigned to a greeting table where they were notified about services, which worked well. In addition, at the second event, the exit table was combined with the dessert table and relocated in a more convenient area to encourage more people to stop there and receive health education.

This community engagement activity was especially meaningful to the nursing students who participated. With the majority of student learning experiences occurring in the sterile environment of the hospital setting, events such as this can take students out of their comfort zone and enhance awareness of the multitude of needs of individuals in their community, individuals who often have issues much different from their own. In addition, students learn that during events like this they need to be flexible in their roles and "go with the flow." They quickly learn that unexpected obstacles can occur and that mild chaos, especially when running an event such as this for the first time, is typical. Problem-solving skills are developed and enhanced as the team works together to ensure positive outcomes. There is a call for nurses to be mindful of the needs of vulnerable populations and the current health disparities that exist in the United States today (AACN, 2008). Meaningful opportunities to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds in the community setting can develop through community partnerships and serve as valuable experiences for students, regardless of their majors. Universities who embrace elements of community engagement can easily support interested faculty by offering grant opportunities and resources for success. Such support can serve to initiate creative and engaging activities in practically every discipline, for multiple benefits to the university and surrounding community.



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