Colleges form student-run homeless clinic

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Phoenix's homeless soon will have greater access to free medical care and health education because of a partnership of the three public state universities.

Students and faculty from Arizona State University, the University of Arizona and Northern Arizona University have joined forces to open the state's first student-run health clinic for the homeless.

The group, Student Health Outreach for Wellness, will house its clinic in the existing Health Care for the Homeless clinic at Phoenix's Human Services Campus, near 12th Avenue and Madison Street.

The Maricopa County Department of Public Health runs that clinic, which provides weekday primary care.

The student-run clinic initially will operate from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays, said Michelle DiBaise, the program's administrative director.

It will extend services already available at the clinic and add services such as physical therapy.

In addition to increasing access to care for the homeless, the clinic will provide a learning environment for students, DiBaise said.

"We will teach our students about other cultures and how to serve this population, and that is just going to be invaluable," she said. "We hope to instill in them a lifelong desire to serve the homeless and underserved populations."

Clinic hours eventually might extend to Saturday evenings, Sundays and weekday evenings, DiBaise said.

Student volunteers plan to present information to waiting patients on diabetes, nutrition and exercise. Law students might provide free legal advice, DiBaise said.

"Through offering disciplines that are not addressed in the current clinic, we're able to fill a holistic gap," DiBaise said.

The student clinic will have two provider tracks, DiBaise said. Workers will ask patients whether they would prefer to see a student in a learning environment with faculty oversight or an instructor with a student scribe present.

"We want the students to be able to spend more time with the clients so they can get some teaching moments, but we also want to have faculty see patients so we get to see everybody that needs help," DiBaise said.

The student clinic's leaders expect it to open in December.

The Human Services Campus serves about 1,100 homeless people per day, said Katie Vandik, housing and supportive-services manager for Central Arizona Shelter Services.

The Health Care for the Homeless clinic handles about 23,000 visits per year, said Corrine Velasquez, administrator of the Maricopa County Department of Public Health's clinical-services division. That's roughly 90 visits per workday.

"This student clinic is definitely meeting a need," Vandik said. "A lot of the time, our clients will end up in the emergency room on the weekends, and that is a high cost of service. If they have a minor health need, they can now go here instead of going to the emergency room, and that was part of the initial desire for this."

The interactions students had with the downtown homeless population through a September health fair make it clear they would be a good fit on the clinic campus, Vandik said.

"They bring a lot of positive energy, a desire to learn, and a lot of curiosity to the table, and I think that's important because our clients are feeling valued and they're interacting with students who are very eager to assist them," Vandik said.

The plan for the clinic began with ASU, which was looking to "dive into the general realm of interprofessional care" and identified the need, said Pooja Paode, an ASU junior majoring in biology who co-chairs the student clinic's communications and public-relations committee.

ASU hired Pamela Thompson to build the student-run clinic because she had previous experience with a similar Canadian clinic. In May 2013, Thompson began putting the program together and reached out to UA and NAU, DiBaise said.

"It sounded really cool that I could have some ownership of this and play a part in making decisions for the clinic," she said.

The student clinic has more than 100 members, including students and faculty. It has received funds for clinic licensing, overhead and supplies through the universities and donations from foundations, businesses and individuals, Paode said.

"We have an entire committee that focuses on fundraising and applying for grants," Paode said. "We're consistently applying."

The group also has created a PitchFunder crowd-funding campaign through the ASU Foundation. That campaign began Sept. 15 and raised nearly $5,000 as of Oct. 15.

The group also is accepting items such as sterile or reusable medical supplies, backpacks, blankets, coats, jackets and hygiene supplies.

To donate, e-mail funddevelopment@showaz.org.