

# A Hidden Healthcare Crisis: *Youth Homelessness*

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**This article describes the complicated scope of youth homelessness and strategies for nurses to make an impact on this health care crisis. The article addresses the current state of youth homelessness and its effect on providers of healthcare and the entire community. The critical role of leadership and the efforts needed to sustain the work to eliminate youth homelessness is depicted.**

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**T**he scope of youth homelessness is complicated and far-reaching within health care and the community at large. Nursing leadership at all levels will be essential to address this complex issue from a multisystem, interprofessional, and community perspective where new alliances are strategically forged. This article describes one such endeavor that demonstrates how an authentic relationship between the members of a nursing leadership conference and a community organization that serves homeless youth in Las Vegas, Nevada, was created.

The Global Nursing Exchange (GNE)<sup>1</sup> is a think tank of nurse leaders who engage at an annual conference to dialogue about relevant and important issues in healthcare. A key component of the GNE mission is to support a local service organization. For the past five years, that organization has been the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY), which is a nonprofit comprehensive service provider for unaccompanied homeless youth in Southern Nevada.

NPHY offers a wide range of free and confidential services to meet homeless youths' varied needs, including street and preventative outreach, mobile crisis intervention, family reunification, emergency shelter, a drop-in center, transitional housing, crisis counseling, life skills classes, mentorship, education and employment counseling, enrichment activities, and case management by licensed social workers. NPHY's full range of programs and services are designed specifically for unaccompanied homeless youth, meeting youths' immediate needs while helping them build a pathway to long-term self-sufficiency and stability.

## **YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CRISIS**

Youth homelessness is a crisis throughout the United States. Although many children experience homelessness with their families, over 4 million teenagers and young adults experience some form of homelessness unaccompanied by a parent or guardian over the

course of a year: that's 1 in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25 years and at least 1 in 30 adolescents ages 13 to 17 years in America.<sup>2</sup>

This crisis touches communities throughout the country, with unaccompanied youth homelessness affecting both urban and rural areas at similar rates.<sup>2</sup> Youth homelessness creates complex health challenges for the young people in need, and also for their entire communities.

Though each individual's story is unique, young people often experience homelessness due to a variety of issues. Family breakdown is the most common contributing factor: many youth become homeless after enduring years of sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse, neglect, parental substance abuse, and rejection. Involvement with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems also puts young people at higher risk of experiencing homelessness.

## **DEFINING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS**

Youth homelessness comes in many forms. Various federal bodies differ in their definitions, but a broad and commonly used definition can be found in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which defines homeless children and youth as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." The law also defines unaccompanied youth as young people "not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian." Homeless young people may sleep on the streets or in other places not meant for human habitation, or they may stay at shelters or in transitional living programs.

Many homeless youth also "couch surf," bouncing between the homes of different friends until their options run out. Many of these youth may not identify as homeless or seek help from homeless service providers, despite lacking a safe, stable place to sleep each night. Other young people may hide their homelessness for fear of stigmatization or to protect themselves from victimization on the streets. For these reasons, though

youth homelessness is widespread, many refer to this crisis as “hidden in plain sight.”

## HOMELESS YOUTH AND PUBLIC HEALTH

These youth present a serious public health issue for communities. As a result of unstable living in often dangerous places, the difficulties of surviving on the streets, and a lack of access to consistent health care, homeless youth experience greater incidences of illness and injury, increased rates of sexual transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy, substance abuse, mortality, poor nutrition, dental and periodontal disease, and increased future risk of diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and musculoskeletal disorders.<sup>3</sup>

These young people also experience elevated rates of mental illness, often exacerbated or caused by both the traumas that led to their homelessness and the stresses of street life: as many as one-third of homeless youth meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, whereas 40% to 80% of homeless youth report suicidal ideation with as many as two-thirds having attempted suicide.<sup>4</sup>

Noted in Healthy People 2020,<sup>5</sup> adolescent health has been added as a priority with the goal: to improve the healthy development, health, safety, and well-being of adolescents and young adults. During these adolescent years, behavioral patterns are developed and assist in determining health status for today and their future health. Youth homelessness has been identified as one the social problems that can impact a usually healthy time in a person's life.

Homeless young people experience these negative outcomes during a key developmental stage, often before they have the skills, education, or life experience necessary to sustainably exit homelessness on their own: because of this, without proper interventions, today's homeless youth are likely to become tomorrow's chronically homeless adults, exacerbating this public health crisis for years to come.

## NURSE LEADERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Nurse leaders have an important role to play in addressing the public health crisis of youth homelessness at many levels, including person centered, local, and national. Because of their ability to influence nursing practices, they can assist the health care community to better understand and respond across the continuum.

### PERSON CENTERED

Homeless young people who do seek health care may not disclose their homelessness, thus requiring expert nurses who can discover a young person's homelessness through their health history, physical examination, and asking sensitive, trauma-informed questions. During the assessment process, nurses can ask patients if their address is permanent or temporary, or note if a patient's address has changed often, nonjudgmentally asking about their living situation and if they need any assistance with food, clothing, or housing.<sup>4</sup>

Nurses can then ensure that a plan of care is developed within the context of their current housing situation, as well as connect them to social services needed to gain stable housing. Connecting homeless young people with survival and further wraparound services is a critical component of addressing their health care needs.

Nursing grand rounds is a great vehicle to tell a story of a homeless youth with the nursing assessment triggers and interventions and outcome for that person.

## LOCAL LEVEL: LAS VEGAS CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Las Vegas has one of the largest populations of unaccompanied homeless youth in the nation. On an average day in 2018, the Las Vegas metropolitan area had the fifth highest total number of these youth of any community in the United States. In fact, since the US Department of Housing and Urban Development began tracking state-by-state youth homelessness numbers in 2013, the State of Nevada has lead the nation with the highest rate of unsheltered unaccompanied homeless youth.<sup>6</sup> The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, states homelessness is the largest risk factor for the commercial exploitation of children and domestic minor sex trafficking.<sup>7</sup>

Nurse leaders in Las Vegas have been building creative collaborations with homeless youth service providers to address this serious issue. At the Nevada Health Centers (NVHC) they have worked with the NPHY to break down the barriers that often prevent unaccompanied homeless youth from accessing needed health care. NVHC is a private nonprofit and a federally qualified health center.

Homeless young people face a variety of barriers when it comes to accessing health care. These barriers can include a lack of knowledge of how or when to access care, a lack of funds to pay for medical care, and a lack of adequate transportation. These young people may also choose not to access medical care out of fear of judgment by health care providers or worry that they may be reported to the authorities and forced to return to an abusive situation. Additionally, many health care providers are unclear on the laws governing their ability to provide medical care to unaccompanied homeless minors. Homeless youth usually do not have a consistent contact address or phone number for follow-up and their medical and immunization records are often incomplete. All of these factors result in care that is more likely to be reactive, fragmented, and episodic.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing these barriers and unaccompanied homeless youths' need for consistent, high-quality health care, nurse leaders at NVHC and staff at NPHY met to discuss creative solutions. The 2 agencies agreed that the most effective way to increase the accessibility of care was to bring the care directly to where homeless young people congregate. Accordingly, NVHC and

NPHY signed a memorandum of understanding that NVHC was to park their Nevada Children's Health Mobile Clinic van in front of NPHY's Drop-In Center for a minimum of 3 hours each week, bringing high-quality medical services to the grounds of NPHY's central facility for homeless youth. NPHY's Drop-In Center is the hub of all of NPHY's programs, connecting these youth to the services needed to become self-sufficient, while providing survival, educational, employment, therapeutic, recreational, and other resources. In addition to case management, life skills classes, therapy, legal assistance, educational and employment counseling, and referrals for shelter and housing, NPHY's Drop-In Center offers an Americans with Disabilities Act accessible shower, washer and dryer, hygiene and clothing closet, food pantry and full kitchen, computer lab, library, respite room, exercise room, art and music therapy areas, a half-basketball court, and a safe place off the streets to homeless youth in need.

The Nevada Children's Health Mobile Clinic is a collaboration between NVHC and the Children's Health Fund, dedicated to serving at-risk youth up to age 21 years in Southern Nevada, with a special focus on the homeless, the disenfranchised, and those facing poverty. The Mobile Clinic provides full examinations and well-child/adolescent care; testing and treatment for STIs; behavioral/mental health screening, evaluation, and treatment; sick visits and acute care; minor surgical procedures; immunizations; health education and health-related counseling; prescriptions for medications; and lab testing. All mobile medical services are provided by licensed and insured medical professionals employed by NVHC: services are provided at a level equal to the recognized standard of care. The Mobile Clinic never turns away young people for lack of funds. For youth who need a higher level of care than is immediately accessible inside the Mobile Clinic, NVHC has also committed to delivering prescription medications to clients at NPHY's Drop-In Center and referring clients to NVHC's brick and mortar facilities quickly and free of charge. The work of the Mobile Clinic is in turn supported by NPHY's case management team, who refer homeless youth to the clinic, assist homeless young people to access Medicaid, and help homeless youth to carry out their treatment plans.

#### **LOCAL LEVEL: PARTNERSHIP**

This partnership between nurse leaders and a homeless youth service provider is improving health care access and outcomes for unaccompanied homeless youth in Las Vegas. By bringing the Mobile Clinic to NPHY's anchor facility, which serves hundreds of homeless youth over the course of thousands of visits each year, NVHC and NPHY are removing resource barriers to care, such as transportation and a lack of funds. Additionally, by partnering closely with NPHY and colocating at their

facility, NVHC is able to build trust with unaccompanied homeless youth based on the rapport these young people have already built with NPHY, significantly reducing their apprehension to accessing care. NPHY is also able to aid clients in accessing needed medical follow-up, providing clients with a mailing address, voicemail system, and assistance with scheduling and transportation, creating care that is more consistent and comprehensive. NPHY and nurse leaders at NVHC are together also able to train NVHC practitioners on state laws and best practices in treating unaccompanied homeless minors, increasing nurses' comfort and knowledge in serving this special population.

#### **THINKING GLOBAL, ACTING LOCAL**

The nurse leaders from the GNE have learned much from the collaboration with the NPHY organization. They have expanded their knowledge of the impact of youth homelessness on health care and have brought that knowledge back to our own communities around the United States. The GNE also has an annual fundraising event with 100% of the proceeds benefiting NPHY.

Also from this relationship, 1 of the nurse leaders for GNE has been on the NPHY board of directors for 2 years and is currently the board chairperson. This nurse leader has brought change leadership practices and health care perspective to the board. This position also supports the American Nurses Association initiative of Nurses on Boards Coalition,<sup>8</sup> which was created in response to the 2010 Institute of Medicine report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*,<sup>9</sup> which recommended increasing the number of nurse leaders in pivotal decision-making roles on boards and commissions that work to improve the health of everyone in America.

#### **INNOVATIVE COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE: THE MOVEMENT TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS**

*The Movement to End Youth Homelessness in Southern Nevada* was launched by NPHY and community partners as a focused, sustained, community-wide effort to attack youth homelessness from all angles. Just as youth homelessness is a public health issue, it is also intimately connected to many other critical community issues, including human trafficking, immigration, LGBTQ issues, racism, and poverty. Accordingly, the solution to youth homelessness does not lie with any 1 agency, system, or sector of society, but with all of us.

Beyond working with clinics, hospitals, health systems, and nursing organizations to improve education, awareness, and collaboration around the issue of youth homelessness within the health care system, nurse leaders are also valuable and necessary contributors to community-wide efforts to address this issue. Youth homelessness is caused and sustained by a confluence of factors; in addition to the health care system, many other systems in our society also regularly interact with

and affect homeless youths' dispositions and futures, including the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, the education system, law enforcement, and the adult and family homeless services system.

Since *The Movement* launched in 2017, Southern Nevada has made progress on coming together to address this urgent community issue. In late 2017 and 2018, NPHY, together with Las Vegas Sands, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Greenspun College of Urban Affairs, and the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, held an annual Southern Nevada Youth Homelessness Summit, attended by numerous health care professionals, business owners, government representatives, service providers, educators, academics, and concerned citizens. These summits served to educate the community-at-large about this issue and bring varied sectors together to ideate and take action.

Throughout 2018, NPHY also led over 40 organizations in the process to create the first-ever Southern Nevada Plan to End Youth Homelessness, a roadmap to systemically address and eliminate youth homelessness in the region. The plan includes 20 objectives and over 60 strategies to combat youth homelessness in the areas of legislative/policy, systems that intersect, innovative housing and services, fundraising, and public-private partnerships.

As the Southern Nevada community moves into implementation of the Southern Nevada Plan to End Youth Homelessness, nurse leaders are needed more than ever to participate in this effort. Through their unique expertise on both patient- and systems-level change, nurse leaders serve as particularly fitting health care representatives in community work on this critical public health issue. In addition to lending vision and expertise, nurse leaders are in an important position to bring the movement's solutions back to health care settings to enact change. Getting involved in community-wide work to end youth homelessness is also an excellent opportunity for nurse leaders to develop leadership skills in creative problem-solving and cross-sector collaboration. For more information on The Movement to End Youth Homelessness in Southern Nevada, visit [www.nphy.org/themovement](http://www.nphy.org/themovement).

In conclusion, there must be a committed response by nurse leaders to address this complex issue in all levels of the health care system and in the greater society. It is recommended that nurse leaders look at their own practice arena and ask the question: where do I start? Lots of options have been discussed: educate yourself and your staff on the youth homelessness issue in your community, review assessment triggers, and partner with social service agencies in your community.

This article began with leaders from the GNE looking to give back to the community with results that have far outweighed the financial support given to NPHY. The participants have brought that experience and knowledge back to their own communities with the

understanding that many hands are needed to effect change in a young homeless person's life.

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