

Healthcare for the Homeless Project About to Add Free Comprehensive Eye Exams to Range of Existing Services

By Ashley Gatewood

Homeless individuals are at a greater risk than the housed population for contracting and suffering from a variety of afflictions including tuberculosis, HIV, and diabetes. Additionally, it may be difficult for them to access dental and eye care services, which can negatively impact their quality of life. Frequently their healthcare needs go unmet due to a lack of financial resources, unawareness of services, wariness of large institutions, and transportation obstacles. It is the mission of Healthcare for the Homeless Project staff and Project Director John Gilvar to treat the medical concerns of the homeless with a comprehensive approach in a respectful manner.

The ARCH Clinic, which serves as the base of operations for the HCH Project, is open 40 hours a week and provides primary medical care to patients on a walk-in basis. There are two case managers on hand to organize patients' care. They also work to connect patients with services that will be most beneficial for meeting their individual needs. Dental services are provided Thursday mornings and Friday afternoons in a dental van which the HCH Project parks in front of the ARCH.



Staff members of the Health Care for the Homeless Project who work at the ARCH, SafePlace, and Salvation Army clinic sites

Gilvar explained the roots of the current HCH Project. Since the 1980s the city had been running a clinic in the Salvation Army, which had very minimal services: one medical provider and one nurse forty hours per week. We realized that we were only scratching the surface in terms of not only the number of people we could service but the services we could provide. Our staff was often frustrated about how many of the clinic's patients just weren't getting a handle on managing their illnesses, were going to the ER a lot, and being hospitalized a lot. We weren't really ever getting to some of the underlying problems that interfered with these patients' recovery. [The staff] didn't really have the time [to help patients address larger issues] because they were just trying to provide basic primary care to as many people as they could. Others in the community, including The Homeless Task Force knew that action needed to be undertaken to better serve the healthcare needs of homeless individuals.

Gilvar described how while writing the proposal for the federal Health Care for the Homeless grant that provides operating funds for the ARCH Clinic and other HCH services, the plan of a more comprehensive health program serving the homeless began to take shape. I was in charge of grants and development [for the City's Community Health Center system]. When I started meeting with people about writing the HCH grant, I got very energized by it. You could see that there was this huge need [for homeless healthcare] that wasn't being met. He learned about an established model that has been highly successful in cities such as Boston and Washington, DC. It allowed these communities to provide extensive healthcare services to the homeless in an efficient and effective manner. Gilvar felt that Salvation Army Clinic services could be integrated into a much more comprehensive program based on this proven model and that the federal grant could be used to supplement the funds the City was already providing. He believed this new approach could be employed to improve the lives of countless homeless individuals in Austin.

Applying for the HRSA grant had its own challenges. The first year we applied we received feedback that the application was excellent but that they weren't going to fund us. They only fund about 10% of the applications. We found some consultants that could help us fine tune [the application]. We went for it again about six months later and this time we got it. We found out that in that cycle of funding there were only 15 awards made and there were 182 applicants, Gilvar said. The grant is \$650,000 a year and covers all of the ARCH Clinic and homeless dental program operations, including the staff's salaries. It also allows the HCH Project to provide medical and dental care at LifeWorks' Street Outreach Center on West 23rd Street and at SafePlace, although the hours are more limited than at the ARCH. The HCH Project uses Travis County Hospital District funds to maintain the 40 hours per week of primary medical care services provided at the Salvation Army Clinic.

Looking to the future, Gilvar hopes to implement a Homeless Vision Care Initiative. Such an initiative is important because poor vision can prevent people from gaining employment, properly taking care of themselves, and finding reliable transportation. Thus far, HCH case managers have experienced difficulty in supplying affordable eye exams and eyeglasses to those in need. During initial clinic screenings,

many patients fail the basic vision test, which emphasizes the need for such a program. The HCH grant does not provide funds for ongoing vision services and therefore volunteers and local funding will be crucial.

Beginning in July 2005, volunteer optometrists will perform free comprehensive eye exams to HCH patients at Trinity Center two mornings a week. Ten optometrists from The Central Texas Optometric Society have volunteered to conduct eye exams and write prescriptions for those who need them. Anyone requiring eyeglasses will be able to receive them at no charge.

He also hopes that HCH will be able to expand its services in the future to include respite care. Gilvar cites a recent example of a man who had a wound that he was unable to keep clean, which resulted in his leg being amputated. We didn't have a bed for him in a facility that had skilled nursing care. That is why we would like to have respite care so people who are discharged from the ER or the hospital can come to a place where we can look after them. Gilvar also notes that when a situation such as a wound becomes a disability, such as the loss of a limb, it creates a greater challenge for the person to become self-sufficient and to find housing. This is Healthcare for the Homeless' main objective: to improve the health and quality of life for homeless individuals so they can lift themselves out of homelessness and find a stable situation. Gilvar encourages those interested in learning more about HCH to contact him directly at 512-972-4006.