Barriers in Access to Health for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles

Morayo Odujinrin, Class of 2018, Department of Anthropology
Homeless Healthcare Los Angeles – Los Angeles, California
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Background
• In 2015 Los Angeles had a homeless population of nearly 45,000 people, but by 2017 it is now 58,000 [1]
• The epicenter of Los Angeles’ homeless population and services is Skid Row, where where health concerns include domestic violence, substance abuse, and infectious diseases.
• In Skid Row there are only 9 bathrooms for the 5,000 individuals who reside there [2]
• Sanitation is a major issue, especially for injection drug users, who do not have a sterile place to use.

Objective
• In the Global Health Program we study health problems such as sanitation or communicable diseases in low and middle-income countries, but I wanted to study these public health crises in my own backyard.

Homeless Healthcare Los Angeles (HHCLA)
• HHCLA is a non-profit that provides physical and mental health care services for their clients as well as help them secure housing.
• At their Center for Harm Reduction in Skid Row, HHCLA provides a syringe exchange, overdose prevention education, case management, and MAT Therapy (Medicated Assisted Treatment)

Reflection
• I spent most of my time at HHCLA working at the Center for Harm Reduction.
• Not everyone who utilized the syringe exchange was an injection drug user – some used the needles for insulin or hormone injections, while others picked up needles for friends who were too afraid to leave their tents.
• This fear is based in the large police presence in the neighborhood, which leads to unsafe practices of reusing needles or not using sterile water or alcohol wipes, increasing risk of HepC, HIV, and abscesses.
• The syringe exchange provides an invaluable service in ensuring their clients are safe in whatever they choose to do.
• For instance I got to sit in when staff trained clients on overdose prevention by administering the drug naloxone.

Looking Ahead
• This Summer reinforced why I became an anthropology major in that I enjoy talking to people who are in different stations of life than I am.
• In the future I hope to go back to Skid Row and work at an organization aimed at alleviating the effects of homelessness or start my own that utilizes a ‘people first’ approach.

Questions
• Why is the number of individuals who are homeless in Los Angeles continuing to rise?
• What is the disconnect between Hepatitis C diagnosis, and administering treatment?

Conclusion
• Administering ‘homeless health care’ is more than cleaning abscesses and supplying clean syringes. It’s also about ensuring that clients feel safe enough to come and receive care.

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