

Visiting Nurse Association provides passionate care

By Lindsay Jump

Four nurses at the Visiting Nurse Association (VNA) have their own unofficial, yet vital, specialty: mental health, young families, relationship development and the chronically homeless.

By meeting the needs of vulnerable individuals in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area, the VNA nurses help the homeless achieve stability and provide year-round care.

"I don't think people realize—until you hear the stories of the people who are homeless—that all of us are one event away from being homeless," says Kris Stapp, vice president of the VNA's public health services.

VNA is a community health care provider that allows shelter nurses to work closely with homeless service providers, health clinics and area hospitals to reach those in need of care, as well as educate other care providers about the unique healthcare needs of the homeless.

While mental health is at the forefront of care, the nurses' highest priorities are systematically assessing the clients and connecting them with the resources they need.

"If they don't have supportive services for mental health, it can really become a revolving door," Stapp says. "It becomes dangerous for

them and it impacts their health."

Stapp says health is a crucial component when it comes to initial and reoccurring homelessness.

"Providing long-term care for individuals is more cost effective, compared to alternatives such as emergency room visits," Stapp says.

Patients with significant illnesses have difficulties keeping a job and supporting themselves, which can lead to losing their healthcare.

In addition, when people are forced to live on the streets, they're exposed to uncontrollable weather conditions such as extreme cold or heat, leading to increases in health problems.

"People who are more chronically homeless, their life expectancy is just not as great," Stapp says. "Living on the street or in the shelter is not an easy thing to do."



VNA shelter nurse cares for a client at the Siena/Francis House in Omaha



Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless

VNA prides itself on not only providing medical care to the homeless, but treating its clients with attentive, meaningful care that creates a bond between the nurse and the client. For the individuals placed in housing, nurses make trips to the shelter's apartments where the clients are staying. This ensures that the environment is accessible to the client, maintains safety and provides comfort for each resident in need.

"It really provides that conduit of support," Stapp says. "It's really unconditional attention that they receive."

In 2015, VNA served 2,434 individuals including 228 children, 264 unattended youth living on the street, and 1,925 men and women, resulting in of 9,572 face-to-face visits.

Stapp says the nurses see clients ranging from prenatal care to the elderly. VNA has made strides to enhance collaborations with the Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless (MACCH) and contributes significantly to combating homelessness by improving the health of homeless individuals, focusing on long-term success.

"We see people who are only homeless a few days or people who have been chronically homeless for 40 years," Stapp says.

Although VNA doesn't provide medication, the nurses connect clients to local, qualified health centers that provide free medical care such as Charles Drew Health Center, OneWorld Community Health Center and All Care Health Center. Having access to needed medications is critical to the client's mental and physical health. For specialty care, Stapp says finding support for individuals is sometimes difficult, but can definitely be accomplished.

Stapp says the most challenging aspect of her job is finding funding for the program. To raise money to support its program, VNA hosts an annual fundraiser called Art & Soup,

an event combining art showcase with a soup competition performed by local chefs. The money raised during the event directly benefits the homeless community.

Stapp says the generosity of the Omaha-Council Bluffs community and the exponential amount of lives changed by the VNA keeps her motivated.

"It's one of those places you can work at for a long time and never get bored. Every situation you walk into is so different," Stapp says. "The bottom line is we're pretty blessed with the services that we have available. Given the right circumstances, we can make a big difference."

