Connect2Health Volunteers Free Up Social Workers for More Complex Care

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Connect2Health student volunteers know that every time they help a new mom find food or a struggling senior find clothes they are making a difference in someone’s life.

In six years, the program has grown from a small team of students at the Fourth Street Clinic to more than 50 students at six clinics serving more than 7,000 hours — assisting more than 3,000 patients and their families.

Measuring that impact is the next step. With the help of Imagine Perfect Care dollars, Connect2Health is partnering with case managers and social workers to use improved technology to track patient needs and volunteers’ impact.

The ultimate goal is to universally screen all University of Utah Health patients for social needs.

“I’d love for patients to know if they walk into any University Health clinic or the hospital they can have their social needs met and addressed through the help of a Connect2Health volunteer,” said Alexis Pearl Lee, the organization’s director.

It’s clear that the resource prescriptions the volunteers provide to people in need at various locations within University of Utah Health and the Fourth Street Clinic offer the literal tools — phone numbers, names, addresses — of the nonprofits and community organizations that can help people stabilize their lives.

Research for comparable outreach programs shows that Medicaid users have fewer emergency room visits and Medicare users have fewer readmissions within 30 days.

Born out of an Honors Praxis Lab on American Indian Health, Connect2Health came to life when students realized many individuals with the most need did not know how to connect to resources that could help them.

The amount of help volunteers provide depends on a patient’s need. For some, merely having someone listen is extremely beneficial. For others, having a volunteer help them apply to food stamps or for housing is life changing.
“Overtime, we’re finding these social economic factors are playing a larger role in patients’ overall health status than their health care,” Lee said.

The goal is for volunteers to do some of the fundamental assistance so trained social workers can provide more complex care such as mental health and substance abuse counseling.

For participating students — who primarily hail from Health Sciences and the College of Science — their time with Connect2Health may inform their future careers.

“We want volunteers to develop skills working with clinical providers,” Lee said. “The other huge piece is meeting patients one-on-one to develop an understanding of what patients go through. Volunteers really see each patient as a whole person.”

When James Barker began volunteering with Connect2Health just over a year ago, the undergraduate was looking to get more involved in the medical field. He started as a volunteer in pediatric neurology and quickly discovered that many patients just wanted someone to listen.

“It’s not necessarily that they expect their needs to be met or you to find exactly what they’re looking for,” the 23-year-old said. “It’s an opportunity for them to feel like they’re heard.”

Now studying for the Medical College Admission Test, he believes his time as a Connect2Health volunteer will make him a better doctor.

“I think medicine now is making a big shift toward caring for the patient as a whole,” he said.

To learn more, and apply to volunteer with Connect2Health, please visit Connect2Health.org. Applications are open annually in April, August and November.

By Julia Lyon