

HEALTH CARE

on the Move

Suitcase Clinic

works to eliminate obstacles to care for the homeless population

Have stethoscope, will travel.

When health care is made more accessible, everyone in the community benefits. And by bringing healthcare services to underserved populations in the community, the Suitcase Clinic has proven to be a lifesaver for many in the Shenandoah Valley.



Sentara RMH Medical Center, James Madison University (JMU), and the city of Harrisonburg are lead partners in operating the Suitcase Clinic, which provides 18-20 hours of care each week by volunteers who visit five area homeless shelters. The clinics address healthcare needs for a population that often faces logistical barriers to accessing care, and the mobility of the clinics allows a vulnerable group to seek care in a convenient way.

“One of our important objectives is to help people who have no medical home find one,” says Sharon Maiewski, a volunteer physician assistant and associate professor in JMU’s Department of Health Professions. “By helping people establish a relationship with a healthcare provider in the community, we are helping them prioritize their health — and, hopefully, avoid complications of untreated medical conditions, unnecessary emergency department visits and hospitalizations. The result is a healthier community and fewer dollars spent on preventable medical services.”

The Suitcase Clinic has more than a decade of documented proof that it is achieving its original goals.

Removing Obstacles

Nearly 13 years ago, Harrisonburg and Rockingham County formed the Healthcare for the Homeless Coalition as community leaders recognized an increasing problem of unmet needs, including health, for area homeless. A lack of insurance, funds for co-payments and medications, and transportation to the needed services were identified as obstacles to the health of these residents, according to an executive summary for an original grant application.

Formed in June 2011, the Suitcase Clinic provides a unique healthcare delivery model, addressing the complex and unconventional health concerns of both sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals.

“Rather than functioning within a permanent clinic setting, supplies can be transported in a suitcase on wheels,” Maiewski says. “The clinic functions in private spaces within the shelter sites.”

The Suitcase Clinic provides acute and chronic health care, as well as screening services, referrals for mental health services, foot clinics, health fairs, immunizations, dental referrals, and free over-the-counter and prescription medications. To qualify for services, clients must currently be uninsured, sheltered or street homeless, or have transitioned into housing within the past 90 days.

The clinic is staffed by a nurse case manager, a care coordinator and volunteer providers who are either physician assistants, nurse practitioners or physicians.

In the past year, the Suitcase Clinic has provided care to more

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than 300 unique homeless clients, with more than 1,000 care encounters, Maiewski says.

“Our challenge isn’t finding patients — it’s getting folks to prioritize their health care,” she adds. “For people who are homeless, in terms of importance, health care falls in behind finding safety, food, personal hygiene and shelter.”

This is where the clinic shines. While health care is



important to people who are considered homeless, Maiewski explains, addressing it takes a level of dedication they may not have.

“They desire good health just like everyone else,” she says. “The problem is that a person without a home has to devote so much of their time and energy addressing daily necessities like working (most homeless people have jobs), finding food and shelter, locating facilities to bathe and clean their clothes, and securing a safe place to sleep at night, that there is little time or energy left for anything else. When I get up in the morning, I can be showered, dressed, fed, caffeinated and in my car headed to work in less than an hour. For a homeless person, those everyday tasks take up most of the morning. That’s why we go to where they are — it removes the barriers of transportation, time, proximity, cost, safety and stigma.”

‘Our People Are Healthier’

The RMH Foundation, the charitable arm of Sentara RMH Medical Center, is among the longtime financial supporters of the Suitcase Clinic. The bulk of the clinic’s funding covers medications, mental health services, dental work and salaries for two staff members.

“The RMH Foundation provides funds to pay the nurse case manager and a care coordinator,” Maiewski says. “These two people are essential to the success of the clinic. They are the glue that holds it all together, and their jobs cannot be managed by volunteers.”

She says the RMH Foundation has been a “true partner” by

How to Help

You can contribute to the Suitcase Clinic by visiting hhs.jmu.edu/suitcaseclinic. You can also help by contacting the following shelters in Harrisonburg and offering the gift of your time and talents:

Asbury Methodist Church:
asburydowntown.org

Gemeinschaft Home:
gemeinschafthome.org

Harrisonburg Salvation Army: harrisonburg.salvationarmypotomac.org

Open Doors:
valleyopendoors.org

Our Community Place:
ourcommunityplace.org



offering encouragement, direction advice and leadership in finding ways to sustainably improve the health resources available to the community the clinic serves.

“I’ve always worked in clinics where patients had few personal resources,” she adds. “Practicing medicine in environments like the Suitcase Clinic and the free clinic can be quite challenging, but it’s also much more gratifying because we don’t have the limitations and extra costs imposed by insurance companies and healthcare administrators. Of course, that also means we don’t have as many options to offer patients, but we manage pretty well with the basics and a little creativity. And when patients need more than we can provide, we help them access additional medical services.”

Some Suitcase Clinic clients have told those providing care

that their lives have been saved thanks to its services. So the clinic can have huge impacts on its clientele.

Any improvement to a person’s health, however, is considered a victory.

“Our long-standing partnership with the Suitcase Clinic has allowed us to conveniently offer acute care services to our often-marginalized population on at least a weekly basis,” says Nate Riddle, executive director of Open Doors, the area’s only low-barrier shelter and support agency. “Not only does the team provide routine clinics, but they meet individuals where they are and assist them with obtaining a primary care provider and/or specialty care.

“Our people are healthier thanks to the Suitcase Clinic.”

RMH
FOUNDATION



Plan for Your Life's Journey

Life is one long road trip, and no matter where you are, we can help you on your journey. We have tools and ideas to save you money, while providing for the people and causes most important to you—causes like the RMH Foundation. Your expression of philanthropy makes a difference to local patients and supports the RMH Foundation’s mission of elevating health care in our community.

No matter how far you are into your life’s journey, it is never too late to update your plan. You decide on your destination based on your own values and priorities, and we can help you get there.

For more information, please visit <https://sentara.giftlegacy.com>. We look forward to helping you plan your future!