Caring for those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic

As challenging as COVID-19 has been for everyone, those experiencing homelessness face additional risks since complying with prevention strategies can be significantly more difficult when you are not stably housed. Over the past 18 months, Pittsburgh Mercy worked to reduce these prevention barriers and support the health and wellness of this vulnerable population here in Pittsburgh.

Bringing life-saving services to the streets

Pittsburgh Mercy’s Operation Safety Net (OSN) connects those experiencing homelessness to housing, food, and medical care. When the pandemic hit, OSN support became an even more critical lifeline as increasing numbers in our community were diagnosed with COVID-19 or felt the economic impact through lost jobs or housing.

Following rigorous safety protocols, our Street Medicine and Outreach Teams, led by Dr. Jim Withers, mobilized to bring critical care and resources directly to people experiencing homelessness - in riverbeds, underpasses, and camps throughout the city. Some highlights:

- We partnered with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services to set up wash stations and distribute personal protective equipment like masks and hand sanitizer.
- Tents and sleeping bags were provided to anyone who needed to isolate but didn't want to utilize traditional isolation options.
- Continued medical roundings and routine check-ins.
- When vaccines became available, OSN deployed mobile vaccination teams to bring the life-saving medicine directly to those in need.

"Driving to a site or making appointments online ... none of this is possible for folks who are living on the street," said Dr. Withers. "You really have to go to where someone is and cut down those barriers." For his incredible work, Dr. Withers was named a CNN hero and featured in a recent news article and video. We couldn’t be more proud and thankful for his dedication!
Pittsburgh Mercy’s Winter Shelter
The Winter Shelter provides a safe haven during the winter months when living on the street poses more serious health risks. For the November 2020 opening of the shelter, we implemented strict safety guidelines to reduce COVID-19 exposure, especially as infection rates peaked. In addition, we expanded the operating schedule to give folks three more months of shelter, provided onsite COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, and partnered with other agencies to offer a quarantine home for exposed and infected individuals to receive specialized care and minimize the virus’ spread on the streets and in the shelter. From November through June, our shelter supported 750 unique individuals and offered 17,000 overnight stays.

“Our medical and shelter teams did incredible work inside the shelter this year; everyone came together and did whatever it took to ensure members of our community had a warm place to sleep and keep them safe from COVID as best as we could,” said Doug Murry, OSN Homeless Services Supervisor. “We had medical professionals on call all night for consults and Pittsburgh Mercy staff went above and beyond to serve everyone who needed our help.”

COVID-19 changed the way our shelter operated but we saw few positive cases and very little spread of COVID-19 inside the shelter. The shelter will open again this fall, providing our regular services as well as testing and vaccinations as we continue to work to reduce the rate of transmissions and provide health care to those in need.

Consider a donation to this year’s Winter Shelter

Sweat pants all sizes
Sweat shirts all sizes
Winter/thermal socks
Thermal underwear (long johns) all sizes
Cold weather coats
Underwear all sizes
Regular T-shirts all sizes
Winter boots all sizes
Small soap bars
Toothbrushes and toothpaste
Travel size: lotion, shampoo, conditioner, deodorant, body wash, shaving cream
Razors
Depends
Tents, sleeping bags and tarps
Cleaning supplies
Monetary donations

For more information, please contact Michelle Mooney at MMooney@pittsburghmercy.org or by phone at 412-697-0730.

Thank you for your support!