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Taking Psychiatric Services to the Street

Homelessness can take many forms: a tent by the river or a secluded spot in the park, hidden or in plain sight. But all forms have one thing in common: vulnerable individuals who often lack access to medical care.

Dr. Lipshie-Williams poses for a photo while rounding in the city.

For over 30 years, Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net (OSN) has made medical "house calls" to thousands of people living on Pittsburgh's streets. Now, thanks to the support of the Eden Hall Foundation, the OSN continuum of care extends to psychiatric services.

The program began last fall in response to the overwhelming prevalence of mental illness in the homeless population. National statistics from 2023 are daunting:

- 31% of those experiencing homelessness reported having a serious mental health condition (compared to 5.44% of adults in the general population)
- 24% of those experiencing homelessness struggle with substance use disorder (compared to 15.35% of the general population).

The data—along with Pittsburgh's growing homeless population—pointed to an acute need for street-level psychiatric services.

Visiting patients "where they are"

Leading OSN's street psychiatry efforts is **Dr. Madeleine Lipshie-Williams** (they/them), who specializes in geriatric and public service psychiatry and the ethics of psychiatric treatment. An assistant professor of psychiatry and clinician-educator at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Dr. Lipshie-Williams now makes psychiatric street rounds

twice a week through OSN. Dressed in casual street clothes and toting a backpack of medical and nonmedical supplies, they set out to visit patients where they are, whether in a camp by the train tracks or under a streetside portico.

Joining Dr. Lipshie-Williams is Maisie Taibbi, RN, a former OSN outreach specialist who recently rejoined the team as a behavioral health nurse. Together, they crisscross the city to deliver care, acquiring patients through referrals as well as word-of-mouth.

A unique doctor-patient dynamic

Street psychiatry tends to turn the doctor-patient dynamic "on its head." Rather than the patient seeking out the doctor, it's often the doctor who seeks out the patient. For this reason, says Dr. Lipshie-Williams, street providers must always be mindful of their position as outsiders stepping into vulnerable peoples' lives and recognize that some individuals are more receptive to care than others.

For many, the stigma of homelessness and personal history of trauma have led to a strong fear of the medical establishment and distrust of anyone outside their direct circle. To overcome these barriers, street medicine practitioners must adjust their methods to suit the needs and realities of their patients, relying on gradual relationship- and trust-building that can take months and sometimes years. This is particularly true in psychiatry, in which treatment relies on a trust-based relationship between patient and provider.

"Most of our medical care is harm-reduction," Dr. Lipshie-Williams explains. "In many situations, addressing basic survival needs takes precedence over mental health needs." The unpredictable nature of street medicine requires creativity and adaptability to meet the challenges that arise. "No two people's experiences are the same out here," they add.

Pittsburgh Mercy is excited to provide this new service to address the mental health crisis in our community. Thanks to Dr. Lipshie-Williams and the OSN team, our city's most vulnerable individuals can now receive compassionate psychiatric care tailored to their unique needs.

Helping Kids Via School-Based Therapy

The mental health care needs of children and teens rose dramatically in the last few years, fueled by the pandemic-related disruptions to young people's schooling and family situations. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that mental-health related ER visits by teens increased 31% during 2020 compared to the prior year.

Pittsburgh Mercy's School-Based Therapy Program has been addressing this need for more than 20 years. Partnering with school districts, therapists hired by Pittsburgh Mercy are placed in the school to provide students from kindergarten through grade 12 with onsite care, both during the school year and throughout the summer.

The first partnership was with Pittsburgh King, a pre-K through grade 8 school on the North Side. Today, Pittsburgh Mercy therapists are in 35

schools within three school districts: Pittsburgh Public, Brentwood, and Shaler. During the 2023-24 school year, approximately 545 students were served.

“It makes so much sense to bring services *to* the students,” said **Nathan Omasta**, Program Administrator for Child Outpatient/School Based Therapy. “Lack of transportation is a big barrier for many, so the onsite convenience is hugely important.”

Laura M. Haile, Program Administrator for the Child and Adolescent Outpatient Program, concurs. “This program really helps us reach those kids who wouldn’t otherwise have access to therapy. We’re in the schools. We’re there.”

How it works

Student patients are typically identified by the school, and the school guidance counselors work with the therapists. A wide range of issues are addressed, from ADHD, anxiety and depression, to anger and delayed social development. Privacy is carefully protected: no one other than the guidance counselor is informed of the identities of students accessing therapy.

Students aged 14 and older can sign themselves up for therapy, without parental permission or involvement. For younger kids, a parent must be present for the needs assessment and to sign off on treatment, and is kept informed of their child’s progress.

Schedules are based on each student’s individual needs; most have therapy weekly or every other week, with services continuing as long as needed. The fact that every spot is nearly always filled speaks to the overwhelming need. “Every time we meet with a school, they ask for more,” said Omasta.

Each school has a designated space for therapy, approved as a Pittsburgh Mercy satellite clinic. “We know that students often tell their friends about going to therapy, and then the friends are interested in therapy for themselves,” said Haile. ”In this way, therapy is being normalized and discussed as something to look forward to.”

*Visit our **website** to learn more about all of Pittsburgh Mercy’s behavioral health care services. We welcome donations earmarked for Child and Adolescent Services.*
Thank you in advance!

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