

## Public Health on the Front-Line: Bridging the Gaps

MPH students at the Jefferson College of Population Health (JCPH) have the opportunity to supplement classroom learning with activities and programs that provide deeper insight into communities through tangible field experiences. One such program is Bridging the Gaps (BTG), a community health internship that offers students front-line experiences and skills for working with vulnerable populations. BTG is a consortium comprised of universities in the region and other affiliate programs. The program makes a strong effort to promote interdisciplinary collaboration by recruiting interns who are studying public health, medicine, nursing, social work, occupational therapy, and other health and social service professions.

This past summer two JCPH MPH students, Ellen McQuaid and Talia Charidah, participated in BTG. The following article highlights their experiences.

### ELLEN'S EXPERIENCE

This summer I had the pleasure of participating in the Bridging the Gaps (BTG) community health internship program where I was placed at Mercy Hospice, a nonprofit organization under the Housing and Homeless Services of Catholic Social Services of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Mercy Hospice is a residential home for women and their children as they go through off-site, outpatient treatment programs for addiction and mental health conditions. Mercy offers on-site case management, parental education, and emotional support

for the women and their children. Mercy has 48 beds for the women and children who are referred to them through the city's Office of Addiction Services, and there are typically 30 individuals residing at Mercy, split between two case managers.

Throughout the 7-week internship, I was paired with a Masters in Social Service student from Bryn Mawr College. Some of our goals throughout the program were to provide emotional support for the women; assist in employment skills; help women to maintain physical health; assist in the move from transitional to permanent supportive housing; and foster a more supportive environment for the mothers in the program. We achieved these goals through various activities, such as assisting the residents in making doctor, dental, and psychiatry appointments; providing resume guidance and assistance in applying for jobs, and creating a resource book of free and low-cost family fun activities around the city for the residents with children.

We were able to work at Mercy Hospice from Monday through Friday, except for every Wednesday when open learning seminars were scheduled for all BTG interns. These sessions helped us better understand the populations we were working with, along with helping us gain useful tools for the field such as mandated reporting protocol, resource sharing for our sites.

This internship was incredibly rewarding not only through a public health lens, but it gave



MPH Student Ellen McQuaid

me a greater appreciation for the dedicated people working in this emotionally taxing field. I feel very fortunate that I was able to witness, on a personal level, the havoc an opioid addiction can have on one's life. Not only did I observe the tremendous pain that has come from addition and homelessness, but also I saw how people can heal in a supportive environment paired with treatment. The biggest takeaway from this experience for me was that epidemics, such as this opioid crisis, need an interdisciplinary health approach to be combated effectively. I am very appreciative to have been able to have my BTG experience at Mercy. The staff was so incredibly welcoming and supportive; they provided me with the type of learning experience that I will carry with me throughout my public health career.

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## TALIA'S EXPERIENCES

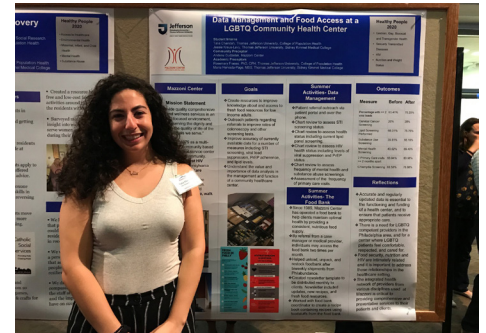
I was first exposed to the BTG program the year before I began my MPH at Jefferson. I was working at a refugee resettlement agency in Philadelphia, Nationalities Service Center, on the health team, where two BTG interns happened to be placed. They informed me of the program and the opportunity to work in a community health setting and engage with students from other universities in multiple disciplines. Once accepted into the BTG program I was eager to be placed at a community partner in the Philadelphia area.

My community partner placement was at Mazzoni Center, an LGBTQ-focused center that provides comprehensive health and wellness services from primary care to counseling and recovery services. Mazzoni Center is the only healthcare provider in the Philadelphia region specifically targeting the health care needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. Mazzoni Center combines HIV/AIDS-related services with a broad continuum of healthcare and supportive services, including outreach, prevention, education, direct medical care, case management, psychosocial services, legal services, a food bank, trans care and support groups. I had the privilege of working in the health center under my community preceptor, Andrew Gudzialek, data analyst for Mazzoni. I was placed in the health center with Jessie, a medical student from Jefferson, and we worked together on different data projects and assignments over the course of the BTG program.

This past summer, as interns, we engaged with various departments at Mazzoni Center. One of our main projects was to work with Andrew to assist in running and reviewing data reports to track client health status and progress. Data was mostly collected

from charts of patients who were HIV positive. This involved converting data from Mazzoni's electronic medical records system to a system called CAREware, an electronic health and social support services information system for Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program grant recipients, like Mazzoni Center. I also had the opportunity to shadow various providers, including physicians, nurse practitioners and behavioral health consultants, in order to become more familiar with the functioning of the agency. Additionally, one of our larger projects of the summer involved the food bank at Mazzoni Center. We created a book of healthy and affordable recipes based on the food available from the food bank, and generated a newsletter template to be distributed monthly to clients. The newsletter included updates, new recipes, and fresh food resources.

During my time at Mazzoni Center, I was able to observe the ways in which an integrated health center operates. By incorporating social services, case management, behavioral health services etc., Mazzoni Center is able to provide comprehensive care to a population that is often marginalized within the healthcare system. Mazzoni promotes an LGBTQ-focused environment, and the provision of LGBTQ-competent care, which is something I believe should be incorporated into all healthcare providers and public health professionals' practice. Just like any other group of patients, LGBTQ-identified patients have a right to feel respected, safe, and cared for, especially in the healthcare space. Because of this, I will use the knowledge I have obtained from observing providers and examining the way that Mazzoni Center operates, and advocate for LGBTQ-competent care in all healthcare spaces. This can be in the form of making sure that the agency I choose to



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employ myself with uses trans competent forms and making sure that the EMR system at this agency recognizes patients' preferred pronouns and names.

Overall, my experience with BTG allowed me to incorporate my previous public health knowledge while also learning more about a population that I have not been exposed to within my public health professional life. Because the program is interdisciplinary, I was able to learn from my fellow students about the populations they were working with, as well as collaborate with them on ways to improve the current healthcare system and how we, as future health professionals, can prioritize the health and wellbeing of our patients and clients while actively trying to change the system that marginalizes the groups we worked with. From this experience I will take away a greater appreciation for collaboration and how important it is for each provider, from public health workers to clinicians, to play an active role in the treatment and service provided to patients and clients.

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