

Service Learning for Public Health Education: A Window Into the World Next Door

The Jefferson College of Population Health (JCPH) Master of Public Health (MPH) program requires all students to complete a clerkship with a public health organization in order to graduate. The clerkship is designed to allow students to apply classroom knowledge in a practice setting through service learning. In the past, organizing and completing the clerkship was a particular challenge for MPH students on the accelerated (also known as LEAP) pathway.

This past year, JCPH collaborated with Philadelphia FIGHT to create an innovative semi-structured clerkship experience for its students. Philadelphia FIGHT (a name chosen to represent resiliency and hope in the face of hardship) is a renowned network of Philadelphia-based Community Health Centers that provides a wide variety of services for people who are HIV positive or at high risk of HIV.^{1,2} FIGHT engages in mental, oral, and physical health care, outreach, community justice, research, education, and much more.² Their clients face a host of challenges and for many, FIGHT is the only place they are treated with respect.

We were two of 34 MPH students collaborating with FIGHT Volunteer Manager Nikki Bromberg, MSW to achieve a number of organization goals, including: generating accessible health education material for a newsletter sent to inmates in prisons and jails across the US; conducting quality improvement surveys with FIGHT clients; engaging in community outreach for a Narcan® (naloxone) training program; developing educational workshops for FIGHT's HIV Prevention and Outreach Summit; and completing other public health activities individualized to students' personal interests.

Our duties within the organization have exposed us to the stark realities of income inequality that are so characteristic of Philadelphia and shown us their direct influences on health and well-being. FIGHT's health centers treat people who are frequently marginalized (eg, those experiencing homelessness, substance use disorder, and severe mental illness) in our urban community who often have serious health problems and seemingly nowhere to turn for help.

Particularly meaningful experiences have come from conducting quality improvement surveys to help FIGHT achieve their mission of providing culturally competent comprehensive care. We asked clients a comprehensive battery of questions including whether their provider has talked to them about harm-reduction methods like Narcan® or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). PrEP is a daily pill that can decrease risk of HIV transmission by 90% and can be a game-changer for individuals looking to keep themselves or their partners safe.^{3,4} A great number of clients we spoke to had never heard of PrEP through their providers, and after learning a bit about PrEP, many were very interested and mentioned they would ask about it at their next visit. One client expressed his amazement that he had never heard of PrEP before, and explained with astonishment that because of it, he might be able to have another child.

Another major duty within the clerkship program was to write articles and subscriber correspondence for FIGHT's Institute for Community Justice Prison Health News (PHN) publication. This newsletter is provided free of charge to a national readership of incarcerated individuals, with

the goal of providing health education information to people in prison and to give subscribers a voice. Every volume of PHN provides a correspondence address for prisoners to contact in order to obtain health education information to guide personal health decision making. MPH program participants spend many hours each week reading and responding to subscribers' letters to prepare people in prison for reentry into society, educate them about prison medical care processes like medical grievances and prisoner medical rights, and answering questions related to personal health issues with valid information from reputable sources. Many letters are benign, but an astonishing proportion have positioned us to reflect on the state of criminal justice in America in 2018; from crippling mental health problems to jaw-dropping abuse and injustices within the prison system, we have been presented with the challenge of deciding how best to help these individuals with our stockpile of medical, legal, and social resource information materials. We have worked to develop the art of replying to letters formally while providing a touch of compassion and caring to those who reveal, through their writing, deeply personal stories, hoping that we might provide them with information that they cannot access on their own while behind bars. Many students in our cohort report reading these letters to be an emotionally difficult but life-changing experience (Figure 1).

The vibrant collaborative relationships developed with FIGHT staff provided MPH candidates with an opportunity to experience firsthand the importance of public health practice while contributing to a highly impactful non-profit organization. Nikki Bromberg's dedicated attentiveness

to diverse individual student interests and talents has opened doors, forged professional relationships, and deepened our understanding of competent, informed public health practice. This collaboration has been well-received both by FIGHT staff and by MPH students and we hope to see it continue to thrive and grow with successive student cohorts.

John "Jack" King, MPH
Katrina Bazemore, MPH

John and Katrina are recent graduates of the JCPH MPH program.

Figure 1: MPH Student Reactions to Letters from Incarcerated Individuals

Having physical, handwritten letters humanizes the experience and the people. It provides a connection to the writer and makes me feel more in touch with what they're going through.

- Nisha George

Reading these prisoners' stories highlighted the shortage of information available in prison. They need information about so many things because they are very cut off and alienated. This isolation is extremely clear in their letters.

- Zachary Fusfeld

One letter was from an individual who was concerned about their family at home. They were asking for somebody to go visit their elderly mother because they were not able to. It was heartbreaking.

- Paul Sebastian

REFERENCES

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