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## NEWS

# Student-led program bridges gap between homeless and healthcare

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A student-run initiative at Florida State University is making a positive difference in the lives of Tallahassee's homeless population.

It's called the Homeless Outreach Medicine and Education (HOME) program and it seeks to provide potentially life-saving medical care and bridge the gap between people experiencing homelessness and healthcare professionals.

While the government provides unhoused individuals with necessities like food, water, toiletries and shelter, the homeless often don't have their basic medical needs met.

"A lot of times when unhoused patients come into the ER or somewhere like that, they feel judged," said Samantha Mankus, the president of HOME and a physician assistant (PA) student at FSU. "[HOME] helps build a more positive relationship between healthcare providers and the unhoused community."

Once a week, with a social worker and licensed medical professional, three to five students in the program make a round to one of Tallahassee's homeless encampments. The group is kept small so as to not to draw too much attention.

The social worker arrives at the encampment a bit before the students and medical professional to explain why the group will be there and identify which people need and want help.

When the students and medical professional arrive, they begin by measuring vitals like blood pressure, pulse and respiratory rate. Afterwards, the PA students listen to an individual's health concerns and the group's medical professional will give advice and make recommendations for further care.

If an individual needs to go to a clinic or get a prescription, the program will help facilitate the process. For basic medical needs, the group has pain relievers, antibiotic ointments, hygiene products and bug spray on hand.

“We wanna show them that we do care about them and we do wanna take care of them,” said Mankus. “Everyone should feel comfortable seeking the care that they need.”

The program began last year and is a subgroup of the Student Academy of the American Academy of Physician Assistants at FSU, a registered student organization (RSO).

There are over 120 PA students in the program, and since the round group size is miniscule in scale, there is a lottery to decide who gets to go. Mankus says in the future they want to do more rounds so more students have the opportunity to help.

“It's just such a rewarding experience for the students and the providers. Once they go out and they meet the clients, they'll fall in love with the program and they'll fall in love with what we do,” said Mankus.

Allison Justice is HOME's faculty advisor and an assistant professor for FSU's College of Medicine. She's worked as a PA at Tallahassee Memorial and Halifax Health, assisted Nova Southeastern University's PA program and has served medical roles in the Florida Army National Guard for eight years before retiring.

“When [PA students] make time in their schedule to go out on these rounds... it reminds them of their ‘why.’ It's really neat to see their faces light up whenever we're done with rounds and they're like ‘wow, that was great. This is so rewarding,’” said Justice.

Because HOME is not a registered student organization, the program doesn't receive money directly from FSU. It has been funded through \$4,500 in grants, \$800 in monetary donations and \$1,700 worth of food, supplies and other goods.

“Part of the mission statement of FSU College of Medicine is serving the underserved,” said Justice. “As far as I'm aware, there are no programs, no other programs that go into deep woods encampments that serve this community.”

According to the Tallahassee-Leon County Homeless Dashboard, there are more than 40 homeless camps and 308 people were documented as “unsheltered” in the past month. There are currently 393 “chronically homeless” people in permanent supportive housing.

A 2022 report from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development says that Florida has nearly 26,000 homeless individuals out of 582,500 total in the country. This is the third largest population in the U.S. behind California and New York, respectively.

“A good thing about street medicine is that you may come in with negative connotations, but when you meet these people and you take care of them, you get to hear their story and those negative stigmas usually fade away,” said Mankus.

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