Meeting Vulnerable Patients Where They Are

A team of emergency care practitioners breaks down barriers to care for some of our community’s most vulnerable patients.

Thanks to a 2021 grant from the UVM Medical Center Fund, COPE (Community Outreach for Patient Engagement) is improving the health of marginalized populations by bringing health care directly to them and providing a clear channel of communication.

“Every time we saw the same patient repeatedly in the Emergency Department (ED), we thought: ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we could meet them out in the community before their illness exacerbated to this point?’” says Roz King, MSN, RN, CNL, the emergency medicine researcher and clinical ED nurse leading COPE.

King and her team have identified 96 patients who represent a small percentage of the population but a disproportionately high utilization of emergency health care. Many of these patients experience housing instability, lack a primary care relationship and have difficulty navigating the health care system.

The COPE team pairs the skill set and resource management experience of an ED nurse with the prehospital knowledge of a paramedic. During a typical patient visit, the pair will conduct a medical assessment; screen for food security, housing and safety; and address immediate care needs. They’ll develop a plan of care for the patient and continue to visit patients as frequently as daily and up to weekly, for as long as they’re in the COPE pathway. Patients receive a card with instructions about how and when to contact the team by text and phone, and when to call 911.

“Donor support is so important because we’re at a crisis in health care, especially in the nursing world,” says King, who will be collecting data to help inform their progress and measure their impact. She’s also looking for ways to sustain the service.

“These grant funds allow us to try something different with the hope that it will make things better for our patients,” she says. “If I dream big, in the future we’ll have a COPE office on wheels. We’ll go out all over the state and provide the education, preventive care and basic medical interventions people need. That would be wonderful.”

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– Grant lead Roz King, MSN, RN, CNL
COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY FuELS EMPLOYEE INNOVATION

2021 marked the sixth round of grants made possible by unrestricted gifts—from grateful patients, families, local businesses, employees and many others—to the UVM Medical Center Fund. These pooled gifts are reinvested in the employee-led innovations that hold the best chance of improving our community’s health. Without philanthropy, these programs might never take flight.

**Dementia Caregiver Support and Education Center**
**Grant lead: Jeanne Hutchins**
There is a dire need in our region to establish a dedicated caregiver resource center to support those who provide at-home care to family members suffering from dementia. This project is the next step in establishing such a center. Supporting and educating caregivers has been proven to decrease Emergency Department use, hospitalization and placement in long-term care facilities.

**The Volunteer Doula Program**
**Grant lead: Martha Churchill, CNM**
Continuous labor support has been shown to improve birth outcomes. The concept of providing compassionate, culturally appropriate, affirmative support to mothers during childbirth is not new to our hospital, but this program will redouble efforts to make doula services more widely accessible.

**Nursing Excellence Initiative in Communication and Accountability**
**Grant lead: Pamela Stevens**
This project will establish a framework that guides nurses across practice settings in the delivery of care, with an emphasis on quality and safety. Communication and accountability will specifically be addressed using an evidence-based peer-review audit system. Aligning real-time feedback with the structured handoff of Patient Centered Report and Hourly Rounds, the project will seek improvements in communication, accountability and collaboration.

**Transforming Emergency Care through Interdisciplinary Trauma-Informed Care Education**
**Grant lead: Christian Pulcini, MD**
Trauma-informed care (TIC)—a treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing and responding to the effects of all types of trauma—promotes health equity and creates safe environments for patients from all backgrounds to optimize their participation in treatment. As the UVM Medical Center Emergency Department experiences record-level visits, this project will help improve equity of care through a sustainable, multi-disciplinary TIC education program.