Community Action Plan to Increase Immunization Rates for Youths Experiencing Homelessness in Washoe County

Project Background
Within the last year, more than 2,500 students in Washoe County were identified as experiencing homelessness (Washoe County Community, 2017). In addition, there were around 70 – 150 youths in the 18-24 age bracket that identified as homeless at the beginning of 2017 (Potter, 2017). The term “homeless youth” is defined as “…individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...” (Enrolling Children and Youth, 2017). Homeless youth experience a disparity in vaccine preventable diseases. In North America, rates of infectious disease are higher among homeless youth than among their peers who are not homeless. For example, the prevalence of hepatitis B ranges from 3.4% to 13.2% in street youth, compared to 0.78% in the same age cohort of the general population (Doroshenko, et al., 2012). Without adequate access and information on all recommended immunizations, youths experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of morbidity and mortality from vaccine-preventable disease.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, public schools are not allowed to exclude homeless youth from attending school if they do not provide immunization records or are not up to date on their immunizations (Enrolling Children and Youth, 2017). Yet in the event of an outbreak, any students who are not up to date on their vaccines are excluded from school for the duration of the outbreak in order to protect their health. This means students that experience homelessness, who are already underserved, are forced to miss class, putting them even further behind their peers.

Youths experiencing homelessness are at a higher risk of contracting vaccine-preventable diseases than the general population, as they are less likely to be up to date on their required and recommended vaccines (Doroshenko, et al., 2012). Of the many reasons for this, the most prominent reason is that they may not have access to their vaccination records, resulting from not living in a stable home (Enrolling Children and Youth, 2017). When families are transient and move from place to place, records are more difficult to obtain because a child will not have just one provider and records may get lost in the moving process. Additionally, if a homeless child does not have a consistent parent...
figure in their lives, they are less likely to be up to date on vaccinations or be able to access their records, because of parental consent issues (Minor Consent, 2013). In many cases, minors cannot receive medical care if they do not have parental consent, which can lead to them being denied medical care. Most of the time, the only exceptions to minors needing consent for medical care is for emergency treatment for life-threatening conditions, treatment related to pregnancy or STI’s, and mental health / substance abuse treatment (Unaccompanied Youth’s Rights, 2011). In Nevada, a minor may give consent for certain services if they are living apart from their parents or guardian, and have lived away from their parents for at least 4 months (Unaccompanied Youth and Access, 2009).

Additional reasons for low immunization rates among youths experiencing homelessness include:

- Difficulty navigating the healthcare system – This demographic may feel discouraged from visiting a doctor because they do not have insurance and believe they cannot afford medical care (Understanding the Health Care, 2001). The healthcare system can be confusing and intimidating to a teenager, which prevents youths from going to the doctor.

- Lack of resources and information regarding healthcare – Many youths experiencing homelessness may not be aware of discounted services provided at little to no cost for medical or preventative care, such as vaccines. On the same note, lack of communication about vaccines from healthcare providers to their patients is a barrier to homeless youth. If doctors do not mention that a patient needs a vaccine, then most of the time, patients will not inquire.

- Distrust of doctors – Homeless youth may be skeptical of visiting the doctor because of negative stereotypes associated with homeless people (Hudson & Nyamathi, 2010). They may feel embarrassed or ashamed to visit a doctor for an issue, because of a lack of respect and negative attitudes toward the homeless population from medical professionals.

- Low priority – Living on the streets or between homes provides many challenges, therefore preventative healthcare may not be a high priority for youths who experience homelessness. Homeless youths may wait until they have a serious health issue, and then visit the emergency room or urgent care. This can be an issue for healthcare expenses and the proper utilization of healthcare, since visiting the ER for a health issue is more costly than preventing the health issue in the first place (Preventive Care, 2017). Vaccination can help prevent visits to the emergency room due to harmful complications from vaccine-preventable diseases, reducing serious illness and healthcare costs. Education concerning vaccines and access to healthcare can play an important role in a homeless youth’s ability to stay up to date on their vaccinations.

We intend to establish a homeless youth outreach program that will fund immunization clinics, outreach, and education to youths experiencing homelessness with immunization resources in Washoe County. We will work with the Washoe County School District and other key health and
homeless outreach partners to accomplish this. Our goal is to identify homeless children and young adults who are not up to date on their vaccinations, and connect that population of youths with vaccination resources so that they can stay healthy. Keeping this demographic of young people vaccinated against harmful illnesses gives them a better chance of receiving a quality education and to be healthier amidst their living situation. Nobody should have to worry about contracting a vaccine-preventable illness. Youths who experience homelessness in Washoe County deserve the best medical care available, and helping to provide vaccines to this population is a vital preventative public health effort.

**What Are Working Towards?**

We are working to increase immunization rates among youths experiencing homelessness in Washoe County. The youth age bracket includes young people 24 and under, with a specific focus on school-aged children, since schools allow homeless youth to enroll without vaccination records.

Goals for the first year of this plan:

- Reach out to key partners needed to make this project successful and contact those organizations to create a task force working to improve immunization rates for homeless youths.
- Work with partners to determine best practices for communicating with the population of youths experiencing homelessness in Washoe County – events, flyers in shelters and buses, doctor offices, etc.
- Distribute resources to young people in need of information at various events and places where they frequent, i.e. the Homeless Youth Point in Time count, Project Homeless Connect, and the Eddy House.
- Keep track of the number of homeless youth that are getting vaccinated at targeted events in Washoe County.
- Work with Nevada WebIZ and Infinite Campus, Washoe County School District’s data management system, to develop measurements that can be used to assess progress.
- Host immunization clinics targeted towards youth experiencing homelessness, with a focus on infectious diseases that are more prevalent in this population.

**Potential Threats to Progress**

It is important for young people experiencing homelessness to receive preventative healthcare such as immunizations because they more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors like unprotected sex, drug use, and exposure to violence (Understanding the Health Care, 2001). Some barriers and potential solutions to encouraging preventative health include:
Barrier: Poor attendance at events – Events targeting this population may not get many homeless youth attending, like Project Homeless Connect and Medicine on the Move.

Potential Solution: We can address this threat by advertising about the events in advance, on buses and in public spaces, and informing attendees about how easy it is to get up to date on vaccines, so that they can tell their peers or family members.

Barrier: Homeless youth not viewing vaccines as a priority, especially when they may have bigger health issues to confront first.

Potential Solutions:

- Showing statistics on effectiveness of vaccines preventing disease – Hard numbers can make people think differently about a topic, especially if it directly affects them.
- Explaining vaccines in a simple, direct way – Teaching youth how vaccines work to prevent illness with visuals and other ways that they can relate with. Beyond doing this at outreach events and clinics, we can put up educational flyers in places homeless youth frequent, such as Eddy House and public transportation. Tying in an educational presentation through the Community Immunization Learning Series at Eddy House or other venues could also work with this demographic.
- Explaining the benefits of vaccines versus emphasizing what could happen if they are not immunized – In a survey conducted in Canada, one homeless youth stated that advertisements should be done in a positive rather than threatening manner. He said “Like do not do it in a way that if you do not get your vaccination, you are going to get seriously sick.” (Doroshenko & Hatchette, 2012)
- Increasing the convenience of receiving a vaccine – Providing them preventative services like vaccines at other medical facilities, like Northern Nevada Hopes. For instance, if a youth is using the syringe exchange service, offer them the flu vaccine while they are waiting to get clean syringes.
- Empowering this demographic to take charge of their health through education and outreach is an important step in achieving higher immunization rates. For example, implementing a guidebook on how to effectively navigate the healthcare system once a youth turns 18 on the Healthy Young NV website.

Barrier: Belief that vaccines are unsafe – This may not be a significant concern in the homeless community, but in cases where it is, we should have ways to counteract common vaccine misconceptions.

Potential Solution: Education is key. Someone’s perception of something can be as significant as facts when making healthcare decisions, like receiving vaccines. One way to influence people’s opinions is informing them that vaccines are much safer than the alternative – contracting a vaccine-preventable illness, which can be deadly.
**Barrier:** Unaccompanied minors – An unaccompanied youth is a minor who has no parental figure in their life and therefore cannot consent to certain medical treatment, especially preventative care, such as vaccines (Supporting the Education, 2017). As teens get older, they are more likely to present to a clinic without a parent/guardian. Unfortunately, most clinicians will deny the adolescent a vaccine if a parent is not present (Kahn, 2013).

**Potential Solution:** Working with clinic partners to determine how they work with young people without a parent or guardian can help us determine best practices in Nevada for increasing access to preventative health care for this population.

**Barrier:** Cost of vaccines to uninsured youth – There may be hesitancy about getting vaccines because the cost may present a barrier. It is important for them to know they can receive free vaccines if they or their parents are uninsured.

**Potential Solution:** Many events offer vaccines at little to no cost, so informing people of these events is essential. We can also refer people to resources that can assist them in receiving free or low-cost vaccines. Promoting the Vaccines For Children (VFC) program, a federally-funded program that provides free or low-cost vaccines to people 18 and under who are uninsured, underinsured, Medicaid or CHIP eligible, American Indian, or Alaskan Native will be crucial to improving immunization rates for this demographic (Vaccines For Children, 2016).

**Key Partners**

Our key partners will be instrumental for this plan – The ones immunizing and the ones connecting homeless youth to healthcare and vaccines. They will help us implement our goals of increasing immunization rates among homeless youth, while we take the lead on outreach and education.

- **Children’s Cabinet** – The Children’s Cabinet’s mission has been to keep children safe and families together by providing services and resources that address unmet needs through a unique and effective cooperative effort between the private sector and public agencies in Nevada. Through their Center for Aspiring Youth and Cottage of Change, they provide a family-friendly living environment and wraparound services for teens and young adults, ages 12 to 24, in Washoe County.

- **Children in Transition** – Organization through WCSD that provides homeless children the opportunity to achieve the same high-quality academic standards by eliminating barriers to their education. This includes transportation to school, health and nutrition services, and summer school. This program works with youths who live in motels, homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, doubled up, or children who are unaccompanied youths.

- **Communities in Schools** - Communities in Schools surrounds students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. They work within the public...
school system, determining student needs and establishing relationships with local businesses, social service agencies, health care providers, and parent and volunteer organizations to provide needed resources.

- **Community Health Alliance** – Comprehensive healthcare center that caters to insured, underinsured, or uninsured people, assisting them in receiving quality healthcare. They set their patients up with discount programs and sliding scale payments.

- **Eddy House** – Intake and assessment facility in Northern Nevada for homeless and runaway youth, providing a safe space off the streets (age 12-24). Its objective is to end homeless youth by expanding services in Reno.

- **Northern Nevada HOPES** – Community health and wellness center that provides medical and wellness services to individuals and families. They accept most insurance plans, including Medicare and Medicaid, as well as uninsured people. They also offer free transportation services to homeless populations in order to receive care.

- **Reno Initiative for Shelter and Equality (RISE)** – Nonprofit organization whose goals are to cultivate a greater sense of dignity and humility by providing equal access to shelter, knowledge, and opportunity. They seek to create a stronger community through the use of shared resources and mutual aid.

- **Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission** – The Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit, non-denominational Christian organization dedicated to helping the homeless, hungry, addicted and abused in the Northern Nevada area. Services provided include addiction recovery, emergency shelter, transitional services, food and hunger services, and referrals.

- **Reno Youth Network** – Online search site that helps teens search for resources they may need, helping them find housing, food, education support, jobs, and healthcare.

- **Washoe County Health District** – The health district is composed of five divisions that work to prevent disease and inform the community about risk factors and prevention for illness. Washoe County Health District has been instrumental in providing immunizations at community clinics targeted towards the homeless population.

**Current Budget**

- Clinic expenses: $2,500, which will cover clinician expenses, staff time to coordinate and attend clinics, printing, and other supplies for clinics

- Partner engagement: $500, which would cover meeting-related expenses, including food, printing, and location fees

- Community engagement: $2,000, covering resource development, outreach expenses, and staff time at these events

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References


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