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Abstract

Mental illness within the homeless community is a pressing issue, which requires an increase in awareness throughout the community in order for it to be properly addressed. A lack of funding for low-cost or free mental health care, difficulty accessing existing programs by the homeless, and few options for care have contributed to the issue of mental illness and poor mental health among the homeless youth community. This can lead to various severe consequences, such as declining mental state for those within the community, prolonged homelessness, and an increased risk of developing a substance abuse disorder.

The Youth Homeless Response Team of Santa Cruz county works directly with unaccompanied youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four that are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Because of the agency's direct interaction with homeless youth, they have an opportunity to begin addressing this issue, by raising awareness within the homeless youth community, and providing assistance in connecting youth to resources. By providing clients with mental health care kits, attention can be drawn to youth about the importance of their mental health and wellness, as well as mental health services that they may not have been previously aware of.

Keywords: Mental illness, homeless, youth, mental health care, access

Agency & Communities Served

The Youth Homeless Response Team is a program created by the Santa Cruz County Community Action Board in collaboration with the County Office of Education. The Youth Homeless Response Team works to address homelessness among at-risk youth between the ages of 15 and 24 years old by connecting them with resources needed to secure stable housing, as well as to support their overall health and wellness through meeting basic needs. Its mission "is to partner with community to eliminate poverty and create social change through advocacy and essential services" (Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County Inc, n.d). The three categories that clients must belong to in order to qualify for services are those of immediate homelessness, facing homelessness, or fleeing from domestic violence.

Once the youth are enrolled in the program, they work individually with peer navigators and case managers to set and achieve both short and long-term goals that will assist them in maintaining lifelong stability. Goals that case managers support the clients in often include obtaining education and employment, but can also extend into more personal goals, depending on the client's specific situation. The agency also offers supplies to youth such as food, clothing, and hygiene products that are available in the office pantry, and can be accessed by youth whenever needed. Staff are also able to connect youth with benefits and services that they may otherwise be unable to access, such as healthcare or nutritional assistance.

Problem Description

Many members of the homeless community, including homeless youth, suffer from mental health conditions that often go untreated, due to the lack of availability of mental health

care services within the community. According to Harvard University, "a study by the National Institute of Mental Health found that approximately 6% of Americans are severely mentally ill, compared to the 20-25% of the homeless population that suffers from severe mental illness." (Kim, 2018). Furthermore, young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have the highest rates of mental illnesses compared to any other age group. (NIMH, 2021). This is important to consider when serving the population of Santa Cruz county, as homelessness is prevalent in Santa Cruz, with 14% of the homeless population being under 18 years of age, and 27% of them being between the ages of 18 and 24. (Housing Matters SSC, 2019). In California, "about a third of homeless people have a serious mental illness, according to the Treatment Advocacy Center. With California's homeless population nearing 130,000, that means an estimated 43,000 suffer from serious mental illness." (CalMatters, 2021). Among this population, youth under the age of 25 are considered particularly vulnerable, due to the fact that the majority of people with mental illness begin experiencing symptoms before the age of 25 (CalMatters, 2021), making it important to encourage homeless and at-risk youth within this age range to make their mental health a priority, and seek help when needed.

Contributing Factors

One of the primary barriers that the homeless population experience in accessing mental healthcare is a lack of funding for such services. Treatment of mental health conditions would greatly improve the lives of the homeless, and the likelihood of them achieving stable housing, as stated by the National Coalition for Homelessness (2009), but many agencies that support the homeless are not able to offer immediate mental health services due to a lack of funding. In the

case specific to the Youth Homeless Response Team, the team lacks funding to employ an on-site counselor. While similar services do exist within the northern part of the county, the southern region where the agency is located, is unable to offer such services to participants.

Another contributing factor is the difficulty many face in accessing public services, such as Medicare, to pay for mental health treatment. While most homeless people qualify for public programs, these programs can be difficult to navigate and enroll in, in part due to things such as the "enormous amount of paperwork with a lag time between date of service and date of payment" (Blasc, 2011). Such programs also typically require a mailing address, or financial information that the homeless may have difficulty accessing, or not have access to at all. These forms can also be difficult to complete for those that do not have strong reading and writing skills. In a study of homeless women, Joy Lewis found that "insurance coverage is not sufficient to ensure the needs of the homeless are met. Rather, nonfinancial barriers to care are greater factors"(2003), meaning that even if homeless people are able to obtain publicly funded care, they may still suffer barriers to accessing it. Some of the reasons for not receiving care that participants in this study listed included long wait and travel times, inconvenient clinic hours, and not knowing where to go for care. Transportation to providers that accept publicly funded insurance can also be difficult for the homeless to access, which may result in missed appointments, and difficulty in rescheduling.

Consequences

By allowing such conditions to remain untreated, homeless youth are put at an increased risk of long-term homelessness and a further declining mental state. A homeless person that either has an existing condition, or is suffering from mental trauma due to their experiences with

homelessness, may find it difficult to maintain stable housing without treatment, due to the "circular fashion" in which mental illness and homelessness exist (Peterson, 2019). The term circular fashion refers to the way in which homelessness often leads to poor mental health, which can lead to difficulties in obtaining housing, which can lead to even worse symptoms. This cycle can begin with homelessness or poor mental health, allowing the two issues to continuously affect one another. Symptoms of mental illness often make it difficult for those suffering to maintain the routines, personal relationships, and careers necessary to support themselves. This can lead them to experience long-term or permanent homelessness, which can further exacerbate existing symptoms of mental health conditions, leaving those involved in a continuous cycle.

One's mental state may also severely decline without proper treatment of a mental illness and its symptoms. As stated by the Desert Hope Treatment Center, "over the long run, leaving any mental health disorder untreated will most likely result in the disorder worsening over time" (2020). This can lead one to experience more intense and frequent symptoms of the disorder, and make the illness itself more difficult to treat, particularly for the homeless, as access to extensive medical and mental health care is oftentimes limited.

In an attempt to cope with mental and behavioral health issues, those affected may utilize substances such as drugs and alcohol. "According to reports published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*: Roughly 50 percent of individuals with severe mental disorders are affected by substance abuse.37 percent of alcohol abusers and 53 percent of drug abusers also have at least one serious mental illness." (Help Guide, 2020). The relationship between substance abuse and mental illness is often cyclical. People with mental illness that abuse substances often do so as a way to self-medicate, and lessen the difficulties in coping with symptoms. However,

substances frequently worsen a person's current mental illness symptoms, as well as contribute to the development of new symptoms. Furthermore, "Chronic use of some drugs can lead to both short- and long-term changes in the brain, which can lead to mental health issues including paranoia, depression, anxiety, aggression, hallucinations, and other problems. " (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020).

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
1. There is insufficient funding of mental health services for the homeless.	Many members of the homeless community in Santa Cruz, California, including homeless youth, suffer from mental health conditions that often go untreated.	1. A person unable to receive treatment for a mental illness is likely to experience prolonged or permanent homelessness.
2. There is a lack of awareness among the homeless about available services, as well as how to navigate existing		2. One's mental health will likely continue to decline without proper treatment of mental health issues.

programs.		
3. lack of availability of mental health care services within the community.		4. Untreated mental illness can lead to an increased risk of developing a substance abuse disorder.

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

The idea of this project is to increase outreach and awareness among homeless youth about the importance of mental health care by providing them with information on local and accessible resources, as well as supplies that encourage them to reflect on and familiarize themselves with their own mental health. Upon intake, youth will be offered a mental health "care kit", including items to promote their own mental health, as well as an easy-to-follow guide on local psychiatric services. This list consists of free or low cost services that are accessible to the homeless population, including health clinics, counseling and therapy resources, and group support networks. The list also includes phone numbers for 24-hour hotlines, for youth that may be experiencing a crisis with mental health, or a traumatic event that may be difficult for them to discuss with others, such as sexual assault. Some of the items included are a journals, which are intended to help the youth remain more mindful of their moods and possible mental

state, such as a self-evaluation. Artistic supplies, including sketch pads, colored pencils, crayons, and markers are included to offer youth a creative outlet, which can serve as a healthy diversion strategy when feeling overwhelmed. The kit also includes a guide to coping with some of the stress and anxiety that comes along with homelessness, and includes instructions for techniques such as breathing exercises, and muscle relaxation techniques. The idea behind such items is that youth manage certain symptoms while awaiting professional assistance, or simply manage everyday stressors, possibly deterring them from self-medicating or partaking in unhealthy behaviors as a coping mechanism.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to assist in addressing the lack of awareness, and difficult navigation of mental health services. Many of the resources listed do not require participants to have insurance, meaning that participants will not be required to enroll in publicly funded insurance programs which may involve long wait times, and limit the services available. Furthermore, the agencies listed are local, meaning that users will likely experience more ease in finding transportation to locations, rather than traveling long distances.

Project Justification

In an article written by Santiago et al, the importance of outreach and intervention was noted several times when exploring how to better serve those in poverty that suffer from mental health conditions, particularly conditions brought on by the high levels of stress often experienced by those in poverty. For example, it is stated that "many effective prevention

programs incorporate skill building to manage chronic and transitional stressors that many low‑income children experience," (Santiago et al, 2013). This highlights the importance of providing struggling youth with coping mechanisms, and healthy ways to reduce their stress. The care kits provided through this project will provide recipients with coping mechanisms and relaxation techniques. Furthermore, the authors of this article also state that, "Some low‑income individuals may not be familiar with mental health services and thus be reluctant to prioritize treatment over more immediate concerns. However, research suggests that when clinicians and all program support staff are trained to be aware of these barriers among low‑income individuals and families in addition to utilizing strategies for overcoming such barriers, engagement in services improves" (Santiago et al., 2013). This supports the necessity of including information for youth on free and low-cost medical services, peer support groups, and crisis services such as hotlines and walk-in centers. The intern has suggested that this project will be beneficial in drawing attention to the issue of mental health, both in staff and clients. While these care kits will not be able to treat symptoms of mental illness, the idea is that when clients receive them, they will give thought to the information and materials included, and hopefully reflect on their own mental health. If a youth realizes that they could potentially benefit from mental health services, such as counseling, they can use the resource directory to access services, or they may choose to consult with their case manager to decide what their next steps may be. In cases where a youth does not feel they need intensive mental healthcare, they can utilize the other materials, such as craft supplies, mindfulness guides, and positive affirmations as a healthy way to cope with everyday stressors.

Project Implementation

The first step in implementing this project was to gather the information on local resources and compile the lists that will be provided to the youth. This required research on information about local low-cost clinics and providers, as well as collaboration with agency staff in order to ensure all resources are included, and the correct information is provided to the youth regarding services. Once this list was compiled, further research was required for the coping mechanisms, practices, and remaining items that are to be included in the mental health care kits. The intern also updated an existing list called "Safe Coping Skills", which was provided by a cognitive-behavioral therapist named Lisa M. Najavits, Ph.D. This list was extensive, and is included in client intake folders. The intern utilized the skills that seemed the most relevant to youth, and compiled a shorter, more direct list to include in the care kits. The intern was able to accept a donation from a staff member at the Office of Education, which was of the art supplies included in the kits. Journals were also purchased as placed in the kits.

After the supplies were gathered and assembled, they were made available for distribution to youth. Distribution occurred by various means. One of these was offering these kits to new clients upon intake, regardless of their perceived mental state. This way, they have immediate access to the information and techniques. For existing clients, case managers of peer mentors can share information regarding the availability of these kits to the youth via email, or during their regularly scheduled check-ins. The agency also posted information regarding the kits to their social media, so that youth that interact with their page were made aware of their existence. Youth may then come into the office to obtain them if they choose.

Assessment Plan

There were two elements of measuring the effectiveness planned for this project. The first of which was to record the number of kits distributed to the youth. When kits are distributed, the information of the person to whom the kit is given will be recorded on a spreadsheet, along with the date. This helps with tracing how often the kits are distributed, and if the youth find them to be appealing.

Further, the agency offered a survey to the youth that have received the kit. This provides feedback on how many of the youth chose to utilize the local resources and hotlines listed, as well as the coping and expressive items provided. They also have the opportunity to give feedback on those that they found effective in managing their stress, and those that they did not find helpful.

Expected Outcomes

This project was expected to provide youth with local agencies that they can directly contact for mental health care, and to provide them with additional ways to manage stress and trauma. Ideally, the project itself will also raise awareness among youth clients about the importance of receiving treatment for mental health conditions, and will lead to reflection on their current mental state, and needs they may have. Upon assessment, it was expected that youth would receive the kits at a steady rate, and that their surveys would be filled out shortly after reception.

Project Results

At the time this paper was written, the expected outcomes were not achieved, as there has been difficulty distributing the kits. There were twenty kits assembled, and so far, the intern has

not had the opportunity to distribute any. One reason for this is that the kits were to be distributed upon intake, as well as when the youth visited the office. One challenge was the fact that many youths have not been present in the office recently. This is mainly due to the fact that many of the youth struggle with transportation, so most intakes have been done through the phone, meaning that they have not had an opportunity to receive a kit. There have also been changes in office protocols since the onset of COVID19, leading to most people being used to carrying out operations virtually. Without the distribution of kits taking place, it is not possible to record or evaluate the youth's experiences, or measure effectiveness. There is hope that eventually, there will be an increase in the number of youth that come into the office, and that they will be able to receive a kit at that time.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Although the project did not accomplish the expected results, the intern is hopeful that with time, there will be more opportunities to distribute them to clients. The intern may need to revisit the distribution process and implement a plan that better addresses the obstacles faced in distribution. For example, it may be more effective to bring the kits to events where larger amounts of youth will be present and distribute them to those interested. Another option would be for agency members to bring kits with them when they meet with youth and include them in additional supplies or materials if desired.

Personal Reflection

The intern not only learned about how the issues of mental illness and homelessness affect one another but also gained an understanding of the difficulties experienced by many

agencies in addressing the problem. While an increased knowledge of the issue is necessary in order to address it, there is only so much that can be done by staff and agencies that are suffering from a lack of resources, materials, and time. Because of the scope and complexity of mental illness in the homeless community, solving the issue requires the cooperation of many agencies and organizations, with a variety of specialties.

One success of the project was its creation, and the written materials included in the kits. I was able to research healthy and effective coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety that youth are able to do in almost any environment. These were typed in English, with a Spanish translation on the other side, to make them more inclusive and accessible, as we have many Spanish-speaking clients.

One challenge of the project was deciding which materials would be the most helpful, while also considering which we could realistically acquire. While there were no substantial difficulties in acquiring the materials, collaboration was necessary, and I would not have been able to assemble the kits without outside assistance. The intern's mentor was able to connect with a former member of the Youth Homeless Response Team that now works with the County Office of Education, and was able to donate art supplies to include with the kits. Additionally, the intern located low-cost journals that she was able to purchase and include in the kits. The remaining materials were printed within the office, with the exception of the positive affirmation cards, which the intern was able to print at no cost, as she is employed at a shop specializing in printing.

This project seeks to address the increasing social need for increased awareness of, and resources dedicated to, mental health and mental illness. While this project utilizes existing

resources and the impacts will likely be minimal, the goal is to increase awareness of mental

health among the homeless community and those who work to support them.

While this specific project seeks to address a lack of awareness, there is a need for more

comprehensive resources available for the homeless community, particularly homeless youth.

Although the homeless population is disproportionately affected by mental illness, very few

individuals receive necessary, life-saving treatment. By promoting the importance of mental

health and wellness, and receiving treatment for mental illness, agencies and organizations can

begin to seriously address the issue. Furthermore, existing resources can increase the focus

placed on outreach and accessibility. Many homeless people may be unaware of how to access

treatment, so it may be helpful for resources and treatment facilities to specifically share

information with the homeless, in an attempt to reach those in need.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Research existing mental health resources in Santa Cruz County, including therapy and medication providers for those that cannot afford treatment.	Compile a list of resources and how to access them to provide to youth in their kits.	June 1st, 2021	YHRT staff
Researching healthy coping mechanisms.	Presenting them to youth by creating an easy-to-follow format.	October 7, 2021	Mentor
Acquire activities youth can use to de-stress and relax.	Providing journals, colored pencils, sketch pads, markers, and more in the care kits.	November 1, 2021	Mentor/COE

Survey:

1. What made you choose to accept a mental health care kit?

2. Which materials did you find to be the most helpful, and how did you use them?

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how strong was your previous understanding of mental health and wellness? Do you feel that this has changed or remained the same since receiving your kit?

4. Have you utilized the local resources listed for treatment. If you are comfortable doing so, please explain why or why not.

5. What do you believe could be added to or removed from to improve the kit?

Habilidades de Afrontamiento Seguras

- Seguir avanzando; la única salida es a través de.
- Espere que el crecimiento se sienta incómodo. Finge que te gustas a ti mismo: mira lo diferente que se siente el día.
- Concéntrese en el ahora: haga lo que pueda para mejorar el día de hoy.
- Felicítese a sí mismo: observe lo que hizo bien.
- Observe patrones repetidos: trate de notar y comprender sus acciones. Repensar: pensar de una manera que lo haga sentir mejor.
- Recompénsese: encuentre una manera saludable de celebrar las cosas que hace bien.
- Encuentra reglas para vivir.
- Tolere el sentimiento, no es definitivo. Prioriza la curación.
- Observe y enumere las cosas que puede controlar.

- Inspírate: lleva algo positivo
- Deje una mala escena - Si las cosas van mal, salga.
- Llora, déjate llorar, no durará para siempre.
- Enumere sus opciones: en cualquier situación, tiene opciones
- Haz lo mejor que puedas con lo que tienes.
- Habla tu mismo a través de eso
- Busca comprensión, no culpas
- Crea una nueva historia
- Evita el sufrimiento evitable
- Organícese: haga listas
- Di lo que realmente piensas: te sentirás más cerca de los demás
- Muévase hacia su opuesto - Cambie los comportamientos negativos.
- Observe el costo: ¿Cuál es el precio de los mecanismos no saludables en su vida?
- Conversación tranquilizadora: habla contigo mismo con suavidad

Safe Coping SKills

- Keep moving forward; the only way out is through.
- Expect growth to feel uncomfortable. Pretend you like yourself - See how different the day feels.
- Focus on now - Do what you can to make today better.
- Praise yourself - Notice what you did right.
- Observe repeating patterns - Try to notice and understand your actions. Rethink-Think in a way that makes you feel better.
- Reward yourself- Find a healthy way to celebrate things you do right.
- Find rules to live by.
- Tolerate the feeling- it is not final. Prioritize healing.
- Notice and list the things you can control.

- Inspire yourself: Carry something positive
- Leave a bad scene - If things go wrong - get out
- Cry - Let yourself cry, it won't last forever
- List your options - In any situation, you have options
- Do the best you can with what you have
- Talk yourself through it
- Seek understanding, not blame
- Create a new story
- Avoid avoidable suffering
- Get organized - make lists
- Say what you really think - You'll feel closer to others
- Move toward your opposite - Change negative behaviors
- Notice the cost - What is the price of unhealthy mechanisms in your life?
- Soothing talking - Talk to yourself gently

Positive Affirmations

Positive affirmations are phrases that are meant to challenge negative or distressing thoughts. By selecting a positive affirmation, and repeating or reflecting on the affirmations, we can begin adjusting our mindset and bringing ourselves to a more positive place. Select one of the following (or come up with your own!) to get started:
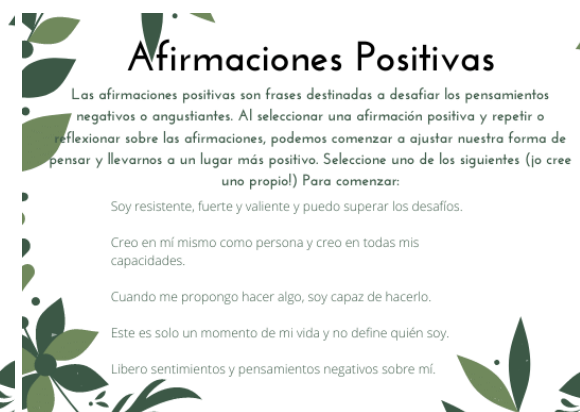
I am resilient, strong, and brave and I can overcome challenges.

I believe in myself as a person and I believe in all my capabilities.

When I set out to do something, I am capable of doing it.

This is just one moment in my life, and it does not define who I am I release negative feelings and thoughts about myself.

Afirmaciones Positivas

Las afirmaciones positivas son frases destinadas a desafiar los pensamientos negativos o angustiantes. Al seleccionar una afirmación positiva y repetir o reflexionar sobre las afirmaciones, podemos comenzar a ajustar nuestra forma de pensar y llevarnos a un lugar más positivo. Seleccione uno de los siguientes (¡o cree uno propio!) Para comenzar:

Soy resistente, fuerte y valiente y puedo superar los desafíos.

Creo en mí mismo como persona y creo en todas mis capacidades.

Cuando me propongo hacer algo, soy capaz de hacerlo.

Este es solo un momento de mi vida y no define quién soy.

Libero sentimientos y pensamientos negativos sobre mí.

Diversions or Distractions:

Redirecting your energy and thoughts toward an activity or hobby that you enjoy can not only take your mind off the things bothering you but improve your mood.

Common activities include:

Artistic outlet : Drawing or painting

Journaling: Creating a gratitude journal, or reflect on positive affirmations, such as those provided in this kit.

Reading :Relax with a book, or even find an interesting article online to take your mind off things

Music: Listen to music you enjoy or find soothing

Physical activity :Exercise, do yoga or take a walk outside

Healthy Relaxation Techniques

THESE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES CAN HELP YOU RELAX WHEN DEALING WITH DAILY STRESSORS, OR WHEN YOU'RE FEELING OVERWHELMED.

Community Action Board
of Santa Cruz County, Inc.

Box Breathing

By focusing on your breathing, you can regulate your nervous system, which can be relaxing. Focusing on your breath patterns gives your mind something else to focus on than your stressors.
This breathing exercise, called "Box Breathing", begins by letting out a deep breath and pausing for four seconds. Then take a deep breath in through your nose for four seconds while relaxing your shoulders, and focusing on the way it feels to bring the air into your lungs. Next, hold this breath for four seconds before letting it out, and repeating.

Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness means being aware of one's current thoughts and actions, as well as their surroundings. Being mindful and practicing mindfulness daily can help decrease stress and anxiety, and improving your focus.

Here is a simple way to practice mindfulness:

Step 1:
Pay attention to your location and position, and your surroundings. Try to put yourself in a comfortable place and position, and simply acknowledge your presence.

Step 2:
Try to begin relaxing by taking deep breaths, and focusing on your breathing and how it feels when you inhale and exhale. Do this for at least a few moments.

Step 3:
Observe your thoughts and feelings. Without trying to clear your mind or push any thoughts away, try to be present and acknowledge what you are thinking and feeling in the moment, as it happens.

Progrssive Muscle Relaxation

The first step is to choose one group of muscles to start with, for example, your shoulders.

Tense your shoulders and focus on how this feels. After hold for a few seconds, relax the muscles all the way, while letting out a deep breath.

It's important to focus on how it feels to relax your muscles, and they return to their normal state.

This can be repeated several times, each time working your way down the muscles in your body. After shoulders, you can do your arms, then abdominal muscles, before moving down your legs to your feet.