

Title: Critical Role of Preventive Medicine Physicians in Supporting a Multidisciplinary Homelessness Commission in New Jersey during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Authors: John Webb MD, MBA, Denise Rodgers, MD, FAAFP, Polly Thomas, MD, Shad Yasin

Background: Public health approaches to homelessness include providing shelter and delivering protective health services, as well as managing chronic illness, mental health and substance use. The COVID-19 Task Force of the Newark Homelessness Commission was promptly convened to address specific challenges created in this vulnerable population by the pandemic. The every-changing circumstances produced by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic required rapid adaptations to standard preventive health strategies and solutions for housing. This report describes the contribution of a preventive medicine team to this commission in Newark, NJ.

Methods: The Newark Homelessness Commission includes non-profit and governmental agencies: the YMCA, shelter groups, mental health and substance use organizations, the Newark Department of Health, officials from the Mayor's office, Essex County, and the NJ Department of Health. The Rutgers New Jersey Medical School (NJMS) preventive medicine residency program was invited to join weekly meetings in June 2020 to assist with COVID-19 public health strategies.

Results: Preventive medicine residents, faculty, and a NJMS medical student provided continuing epidemiological data updates, education on PPE and other infection control protocols, and scientific information on COVID-19 testing and vaccination strategies. Additionally, solutions for monitoring illness, sheltering during cold nights, equity in care delivery, and long-term eradication of homelessness, were discussed. Preventive medicine team reported CDC and HUD guidelines on best practices for shelters, healthy housing methods in other cities, custom infographics on hand hygiene and masking, a brochure for donning and doffing PPE, and a chart on comparative COVID-19 testing accuracy and vaccination efficacy. Many of these resources were utilized directly in shelters to educate workers and residents.

Conclusions: Complex social issues require multidisciplinary examination. Preventive medicine physicians are uniquely trained and positioned to support teams addressing issues in population health and public welfare. COVID-19 has spotlighted the value of expertise in preventive medicine and public health.