When Homelessness and Mental Illness Overlap: A Cross-Sector Conversation

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SPEAKERS

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BACKGROUND

• Recent HUD data estimate 14% of people in shelters and 43% of people experiencing unsheltered homeless have a serious mental illness. However, there are substantial limitations with the data, including measuring the true scope of the population and their health needs.

• The majority of people with serious mental illness in the U.S. are not homeless. Serious mental illness combined with structural issues – such as poverty, mass incarceration, a lack of affordable housing, and gaps in the social safety net – create risks for becoming homeless.

• There is substantial agreement across sectors about challenges and solutions to concurrent experiences of homelessness and mental illness. Examples identified in this seminar included:
  • A lack of coordination between healthcare, homeless services, and other social services systems;
  • A lack of community-based treatment options and difficulty accessing existing options;
  • Difficulty establishing long-term connections to care from hospital settings;
  • Negative stigma around mental health; and
  • A lack of affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

Current systems work around the margins of the problem. Hospitals and the shelter system are built to be at or near capacity 24/7 and serve as safety nets for other systems failures. This presents challenges to appropriate placement, discharge, and flexibility to meet patient/consumer needs.

People experiencing homelessness and serious mental illness require services tailored to their specific needs. Small shelters with intensive services are preferable to large shelters, but availability is limited.

Investments must be increased to match the need for:
  • Mental health care, including community-based care and short-, medium-, and long-term options.
  • Affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

“The experience of people with mental illness is as broad as the experience of all humanity.”

“IT is not what is wrong with people, but what has happened to people.”

Click here for April 26th 2022 event recording.

The Health x Housing Lab in the Department of Population Health at NYU School of Medicine provides evidence-based guidance for initiatives sitting at the intersection of health and housing. The Health x Housing Lab aims to advance health equity and work toward a future in which all people have safe, stable, and affordable housing.