Health x Housing Lab Seminar Series
When Homelessness and Mental Illness Overlap: A Cross-Sector Conversation
April 26, 2022

Background

- Recent HUD data estimate 14% of people in shelters and 43% of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness 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.

Key Takeaways

- 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.

Click here for the 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.