

## Hands-on Telemedicine

### HOPE Services Street Medicine Program Assists Homeless with Health Care During Pandemic

By HOPE Services Street Medicine Team

At every level of society human beings experience barriers to accessing healthcare, whether it's the shortage of physicians accepting new patients, the impossibility of scheduling a timely appointment, the geographic distance between home and medical care, the challenge of finding transportation, language barriers, communication and technology issues, or the price of insurance or care. For people experiencing homelessness, each barrier is amplified by the daily struggle to survive on the streets. Having to make choices between going to the doctor or risking their possessions being stolen, spending money on food or medicine, or simply having lost faith in healthcare due to previous negative experiences, these challenges seem insurmountable. According to the American Medical Association, "marginalized and minoritized patients have and will suffer disproportionately during the COVID-19 crisis due to the inequities in society perpetuated by systematic practices."

Telemedicine has proven to be a viable, cost-effective solution that improves access to healthcare. Telemedicine utilization has skyrocketed during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, there were an average of 13,000 Medicare beneficiaries receiving telemedicine per month. To date, over 10 million Medicare beneficiaries have received telemedicine during this public health emergency.

HOPE Services Hawaii's (HOPE) Street Medicine was developed in May 2019 with the objective of reducing inequities and barriers. Each Wednesday night a team of dedicated active and retired healthcare professionals canvass the streets, encampments, and emergency shelters of Hilo to connect with people in need of healthcare. In alleyways, under bridges, on beaches, in cars and in tents, street outreach specialists, registered nurses, medical doctors, nurse practitioners, physician's assistants and paramedics provide emergency nutrition, hygiene, first-aid kits, masks, hand sanitizer, and healthcare education. They clean and bandage festering wounds, remove sutures, provide comprehensive medical assessments, conduct COVID-19 screening and testing, schedule medical appointments and transportation, facilitate emergency case management, facilitate entry to detox and rehab, assist in emergency shelter placement. When a medical doctor, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant is present, prescriptions are called in, picked up, paid for and delivered to the patient--sometimes all in the course of an hour.

On the nights when the team is without a provider of that level, they've utilized telemedicine, and realized the world of potential it offers to those on the street. In partnership with Premier Medical Group, the team can connect with a physician on a smartphone and facilitate a patient assessment right there on the street! The patient can benefit from this by having a prescription

called in, receiving a specialty referral, obtaining a note to their primary doctor, or scheduling a face-to-face follow up visit by the telemedicine physician the next day. During a time where the community experiencing homelessness faces monumental barriers, street telemedicine is an innovative technological solution, which helps address health disparities exacerbated by the pandemic. These encounters are often the first step to building trust in social service providers and becoming more actively engaged in the journey to permanent housing, which for HOPE clients is the ultimate goal.

To date, the team has been on 67 missions, seen over 400 patients and helped avoid countless emergency room visits by treating preventable maladies before they become emergencies. Unfortunately, the team does not currently have the funding or manpower to deliver care beyond Wednesday nights, but they HOPE these encounters are the first step toward nurturing meaningful relationships between the healthcare and houseless communities.

HOPE Services' Street Medicine Team is excited about the power of telemedicine and is currently working with Community First and the Pacific Basin Telehealth Resource Center in pursuit of funding for dedicated telehealth access points in our island's homeless system. When programs like these are funded, barriers become surmountable, inequities become less stark, and patients become healthier.

**HOPE Services' Street Medicine program is made up of HOPE staff and community volunteers and works under the medical direction of the Premier Medical Group, with support from Bay Clinic, Clinical Labs of Hawaii, and HMSA.**