

Nonprofits announce "Hui with HOPE" program

By Brandee Menino and Dr. Ka'ohimanu Dang Akiona

HOPE Services Hawai'i and Hui Mālama Ola Nā 'Ōiwi are pleased to announce "Hui With HOPE," a new program bringing medical care to the streets for those experiencing homelessness.

The program partners medical personnel with homeless outreach workers who seek out people living in homeless encampments. Each mission is led by a doctor, physician's assistant, or nurse practitioner, with assistance from other medical staff and homeless outreach workers.

Encounters are structured much like a normal medical visit, including information gathering, physical exam and evaluation, and creation of a treatment plan. Every effort is made to deliver care at the point of contact. To date, this has included wound care and support getting appropriate medication, as well as assistance with establishing a primary care medical home. Services such as wound care, infection treatment, shots and drug delivery are performed on location, while serious cases may be referred and transported to a hospital.

Street Medicine missions currently take place on Wednesday evenings in Hilo. Staff meet at Hale Maluhia Men's Shelter, where they review the list of patients and locations they plan to visit. The list is compiled based on referrals from the community and previous contact with staff. More stops are added if new homeless encampments are encountered during the mission.

The Street Medicine team hopes to bridge the gap between available medical resources, and those who fall through the cracks.

"The health care system is set up in a way that puts up barriers to care for the most vulnerable people in our community," said Dr. Ka'ohimanu Dang Akiona, Hui Mālama's Medical Director. "The people we meet on the street often have low health literacy, and are unable to afford co-payments, medication, lab work, or interventions. Many of the patients we engage with don't have reliable transportation, and when they've visited hospitals and clinics in the past, they have felt unwanted or unseen."

"Whether the challenges are physical, mental, emotional, or even socioeconomic, we need to actively engage with these folks, and seek out ways to overcome these barriers, so that we can truly deliver quality care to everyone."

In addition to medical care, the Street Medicine team provides an alternative approach for outreach workers to offer shelter and homeless services to those who haven't engaged with them.

"Through direct and regular outreach, we will bridge the gaps between the homeless and medical communities. In doing so, we hope to address their unique psychosocial and health care needs

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with the ultimate goal of improved health, quality of life and stable long term housing," says Carrie Ho'opi'i, HOPE Services Outreach Team Leader.

The team has so far engaged with 56 people over 13 missions since the program began this May.

The pilot program is currently limited to Hilo, but the agencies hope to expand it, as funding and capacity increase.

If you know of an individual who you believe could benefit from a Street Medicine assessment, or would like to help support the program, please email streetmedicine@hopeserviceshawaii.org.

Hui Mālama Ola Nā 'Ōiwi is a nonprofit that serves as the Native Hawaiian Health Care System for Hawaii Island.

HOPE Services is the largest homelessness service provider on Hawaii Island. If you or someone you know has been evicted or is experiencing homelessness, call the HOPE help line at 808-935-3050.

This story was prepared by Community First, a nonprofit organization founded by KTA's Barry Taniguchi and supported by a volunteer board of community leaders. Visit www.communityfirsthawaii.org for more information.