

Stories from the field:

One person's resilience can inspire others

If anyone knows what it's like to be homeless and hooked on heroin for over two decades, it's Gary Cobb. Now clean for 13 years and paying a mortgage, he's helping others at the same place that helped him—Central City Concern (CCC).

Since 1979, this Portland 501(c)(3) nonprofit has been serving single adults and families hit by homelessness, poverty and addictions. A client there himself once, Cobb worked as a janitor at CCC for nine years and three more as a Community Organizer. Now he's one of five Health Resilience Specialists with the organization's Community Health Improvement Projects (CHIPs), all newly created positions funded by the Health Commons Grant.

"We're more like threaders and weavers," says Cobb. "We're threading people through the complexity of the hospitals' systems and trying to navigate them here to CCC.

And then we weave them through our continuing care—from our drug treatment programs to supportive housing to employment access services, and all the medical and mental health services in between."

Chronic homelessness, multiple physical and mental-health issues, and overuse of the ER are seen in the outreach team's 75-100 clients, who often can't manage their medications and also sometimes resort to desperate means to support their drug and/or alcohol addictions. "They're good people in a bad space," as Cobb puts it. "Addiction is at the bottom of it for many people. They're self-medicating, responding to what they don't have in life, like housing or a living-wage job; or what they do have, like a medical condition."

They usually initially come to the CHIPs outreach team through referrals from elsewhere at CCC, as well as from local hospitals and emergency departments. Typically, the first contact Cobb has with a patient happens in the ER. If appropriate to his or her reason for being there, "we educate the person, letting them know that whatever procedures they had done in ER can be done here at CCC's Old Town Clinic, and maybe they need an appointment," he says. "We may try to pick them up for that if we know where their camp is. We've also given people track phones, so they can stay connected with us."

Meanwhile, the CHIPs team has been conversing with ER physicians and hospital psychiatrists, building relationships with them and together coming up with patient-care plans, at CCC and elsewhere. Doing this is "pretty unique," says Cobb. The plan may include short-term supportive housing. "It's working well. The coolest thing is seeing folks doing a lot better. And I can hear a sigh of relief from the ERs."

They and Cobb are also bracing themselves. As of January 2014, the Affordable Care Act begins delivering insurance coverage to tens of thousands more Oregon Medicaid patients. Says fellow CHIPs Health Resilience Specialist, Tammy Wilkins, "I get nervous about the size of the caseloads that's expected, because they are very vulnerable patients with complex needs. I just want to be able to give the attention they need, to see some improvement in quality of life." It's too early in the grant for numbers. "But we have some anecdotal evidence that some of the work we're currently doing, in a short amount of time, is making a positive difference in these individuals' lives, as well as easing the financial burden and impact on the communities around them," says Cobb.

What happens in 2016 at the end of the Health Commons Grant? Just as a backpack made of strong fabric can carry heavy loads, CHIPs' success should assure further funding for its Outreach Workers. And Cobb will still be one of them. "I'm just an ex-junkie trying to do my part in the world to make it a little bit better."

For more information about the Health Resilience Specialists in the Interdisciplinary Community Care Program, part of the Health Commons Grant, contact Rebecca Ramsay at ramsayr@careoregon.org.



Funded in part by the Health Commons Grant, Gary Cobb, a Health Resilience Specialist at Central City Concern, helps clients navigate the complexity of the health care and social service system, making a difference in the health outcomes and cost of care for high need Medicaid patients.