

Holistic Approach to Homelessness

By Yves Augustin

A successful holistic care approach to homelessness integrates primary care, mental health, housing, education, employment, life skills education, life coaching, community building, art therapy, animal-assisted therapy, cultural competency, spirituality, and multiculturalism. From October 2008 to February 2011, I was able to test my holistic model with 13 clients who were dealing with chronic homelessness (from 5 to 30 years) in the Berkeley and Oakland areas in Northern California. The results were significantly positive with 100% of housing retention during the 27-month period; and this experiment has forever changed my worldview as well as my perspective of the human experience and condition as a whole.

Although supportive housing programs have been relatively successful in the US, service delivery and coordination still remain critical, especially in the long run. And that is where my holistic care approach comes in—as the missing link. Additionally, various stakeholders have also been arguing for a holistic approach to homelessness due to the increasing number of homeless people nationwide - please check out the following links for more details:

1. <http://digital.vpr.net/post/considering-holistic-approach-homelessness-vermont>
2. <http://tbo.com/list/news-opinion-editorials/legislative-measures-offer-holistic-approach-to-homelessness-20140227/>

Given each individual is unique and his/her journey to homelessness is the result of a unique set of life circumstances, therefore my holistic care approach is based on an innovative, context-specific, human-centered and intuitive process which enables me to primarily address the social determinants of health of each client – considering that homelessness is a significant social determinants of health. In other words, my holistic care approach enables me to:

- 1) meet each client wherever he/she is at;
- 2) develop a trusting provider-client relationship with him/her;
- 3) identify his/her multiple needs (i.e. physical, mental, social, financial, educational, vocational, spiritual, etc);
- 4) see the bigger picture, even if he/she does not (i.e. his/her potential and obstacles);
- 5) leverage available resources and seek out innovative solutions through advocacy and partnerships.

Through my life journey so far, I learned that each human being needs a support system that corresponds to the various dimensions of the human experience, such as: physical, mental, social, financial, educational, cultural, emotional, recreational, vocational, spiritual, etc. Therefore, our development and survival (as human beings) are in serious danger without a support system – whether we are homeless or housed. From my long-term experience working with the homeless, I also learned that homelessness is essentially a human problem which requires human-centered solutions. Consequently, some of the key ingredients of my holistic care approach are: compassion, acceptance, commitment, consistency, empathy, faith, honesty, hope, kindness, and trust. By the way, it is very encouraging to witness the increasing efforts to support the necessary practice of compassion in organizations, communities, professional & personal relationships, etc. Please check out how NHS England is implementing compassion throughout its entire organization: <http://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2015/aug/25/want-a-compassionate-nhs-then-make-sure-staff-are-happy>

Another key component of my holistic care approach was to provide my 13 clients with necessary life skills that they have lost or never had, in order to restore self-sufficiency and foster social reintegration. Consequently, I designed, implemented and managed a monthly training (indoors and outdoors) to empower, inspire and motivate them both individually and collectively. Despite the unprecedented success of my holistic model, I still had to deal with ongoing challenges that many clients were facing on a regular basis, such as: episodes of depression, conflicts with other tenants, occasional crisis due to alcohol and other substances abuse, eviction threats from landlords, etc. I also made it a priority to perform welfare check-ups and/or follow-ups on them beyond the normal work hours (including evenings and weekends) and despite seasonal bad weather. As a result, their frequent trips to the emergency room (ER) and jail, prior to being housed, were reduced significantly from 10 times or more per year to 3-4 times per year.

The oldest client, a 77-year-old blind man, was a veteran and had been homeless for over 30 years – which is the longest period of homelessness among all the clients I have ever worked with. At first, I could not believe this man had been failed by the public health system for over three decades. One can easily imagine how much money he must have cost the Alameda County health care system due to his frequent trips to the ER. A year later after I met him, I was able to accomplish “the impossible” by placing him in a skilled nursing home, thanks to my holistic care approach. Unfortunately, he died three months later inside the nursing home with dignity - which is not the case for most chronically homeless persons (like he was) who keep dying alone on the streets. Catherine Pearson (from Huffington Post) reports that homeless individuals make about 1 million hospital visits per year in US, which is the equivalent of \$6.7 billion in ‘unnecessary’ health care expenditures, according to the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Pearson's article '*Care In Your Heart': Homeless Health Care Costs Prompt Experiments On The Margins*', can be accessed here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/26/homeless-health-care_n_1450108.html

In short, my holistic care approach is innovative, cost-effective, context-specific and sustainable. It is also deeply rooted in the health promotion philosophy because it enables the provider to see the bigger picture through integrating and leveraging the public health’s perspective and the social work’s perspective in order to develop innovative and comprehensive solutions. Please check it out through the link below – and your comments are welcome! <http://www.slideshare.net/YvesAugustin/holistic-approach-to-homelessness>

BIO

Yves Augustin is an Independent Holistic Strategist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. By combining his knowledge and experience in Social Work, Public Health and Life Coaching, he provides holistic care management, coaching, consultation and counseling to various clients so that they can improve their health, reach their goals, cultivate healthy relationships, and/or enhance their overall well-being. His professional interests include but are not limited to: Community Health, Global Health, Health Care for the Homeless, Health Innovation, Health Promotion, Holistic Health, Human Rights and Advocacy, HIV/AIDS, Maternal and Newborn Health, mHealth, Patient-centered Care, Social Determinants of Health. His holistic framework consists of: body, mind, spirit, emotions and stories. As Plato puts it: "The Part can never be well unless the Whole is well.

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