Homelessness in LA: Dire but not hopeless

A new project in Malibu and Pacific Palisades is bringing community members and law enforcement together with outreach teams to provide rapid response for people experiencing homelessness. Story on page 2.
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The caller identified three people: a mother and a father, both in their thirties, and a little girl, probably about 3.

So when members of the outreach team arrived at the Malibu library, it didn’t take them long to find the family. Mom and daughter were out back, the girl playing under the strawberry trees. Dad was inside, a hood pulled tightly over his head.

A physician from Venice Family Clinic, Coley King, DO, and a social worker from partner homeless service agency The People Concern, Alex Gittinger, politely introduced themselves to the mother, explaining that they could help connect her family to health care and other support, even housing. As Dr. King took her blood pressure, he and Gittinger mentioned that their two organizations had funds to put the family up in a motel room immediately. They could then work on helping the family get permanent housing.

“She was reluctant at first because she suspected her husband wouldn’t go,” Dr. King later said. “Alex promised her he would keep coming back to the library until he convinced her husband to join them, and I just kept telling her, ‘Do it for your daughter.’”

“The health care component is intended to both stabilize sick and injured patients and create relationships so we can eventually get them into the Clinic and ramp up their care,” said Dr. King, who is the Clinic’s director of homeless services. “But the end goal in every case is getting them housing. Once people are housed, their health and wellness really take off.”

A second team, made up of Venice Family Clinic’s Nancy Pierre-Paul, NP (left), and The People Concern’s Glanda Sherman, conducts outreach in Pacific Palisades. Photo: Margaret Molloy

Venice Family Clinic providers also perform homeless outreach at The People Concern’s Access Center and on the street in Santa Monica: along 3rd Avenue and other areas of homeless concentration on the streets of Venice; within Safe Place for Youth and St. Joseph Center in Venice; at Manchester Square, near LAX; and, during the winter months, at the cold weather shelter in Culver City.

In addition, the Clinic is in the process of hiring three new providers to conduct outreach in areas farther inland as part of the Countywide Outreach (or “E6”) component of Measure H, a ballot initiative approved by voters in April that will raise approximately $3.5 billion over ten years for dozens of activities to combat homelessness.

Measure H comes at a time when homelessness is reaching an all-time high in LA County. According to the County’s spring homeless count, the number of people experiencing homelessness jumped 23 percent from the year before, to nearly 58,000 people. Much of the change is being driven by the skyrocketing cost of housing, and more families are falling victim. Their numbers increased nearly 30 percent.

A need for new approaches

The outreach partnership, known as the as the Judy and Bernard Briskin Malibu/Pacific Palisades Homeless Project, was launched in January 2017 and includes a second team in the Palisades, each with a psychiatrist. In both cases, the teams coordinate with members of the community and law enforcement to keep an eye out for people experiencing homelessness and provide rapid response. The generous gift from the Briskins funds health care, temporary housing, and case management.

As part of the Judy and Bernard Briskin Malibu/Pacific Palisades Homeless Project, a joint outreach team—combining (left to right) psychiatrist Wes Ryan, MD, and family physician Coley King, DO, from Venice Family Clinic with social worker Alex Gittinger of The People Concern—seeks out people experiencing homelessness in Malibu. Photo: Margaret Molloy
Theresa M. Brehove, MD
1959–2017

We at Venice Family Clinic were stunned and indescribably saddened by the sudden passing of our dear friend and coworker Dr. Terri Brehove, on September 13. A longtime director of the Clinic’s homeless health care program, Dr. Brehove was the archetypal doctor and advocate, always putting patients and their well-being first. In fact, “What would Terri say?” has become a refrain among the Clinic’s staff when making decisions affecting patients. It will certainly remain one for years to come.

“I feel like we’re now seeing the tip of the iceberg,” Dr. King said, noting that he recently came upon a homeless mother with her three daughters. “No mental health issues, no addiction. They just can’t afford rent. To me, this is the next big wave: children and families.”

The man had been homeless for approximately 20 years, he told the team. He was only 37.

“We dropped him off at the library and gave him a peace offering of some food and socks,” Dr. King said. “I suspect he was headed downtown, but now at least he knows where to find us. Maybe we’ll see him again.”

But that same day, they also encountered Dennis, a 64-year-old Vietnam veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder. After months of contact with the outreach team, he said he was at last ready to get into permanent housing. Gittinger and his counterparts at The People Concern have him on a wait list, and when he gets an apartment, he will be housed for the first time in more than 20 years.

Dennis, 64, who the Malibu team has been visiting for months, recently decided he is ready for his first permanent home in more than 20 years. Photo: Margaret Molloy

“A vet who at first wouldn’t accept services, serious history of true PTSD, traditional shell shock, nightmares, needed meds to sleep through the night, hid in the bushes,” Dr. King reflected. “He gets to know us, gets sober, and now is ready for housing. What a great progression to a story.”

Meeting people where they are

Back at the library, Dr. King and Gittinger waited patiently as the mother discussed their offer with the father. He declined. But she accepted, and within an hour, she and her little girl were on their way to a motel in Santa Monica. The following week, thanks to daily visits by Gittinger, the father joined them. The family is now stabilized and has been referred to St. Joseph Center for help in acquiring permanent housing. The mother is even beginning to work.

Of course, not all situations reach such a quick resolution. On another Thursday afternoon, Dr. King and Gittinger, along with a psychiatrist from Venice Family Clinic, Wes Ryan, MD, encountered a man lying on the side of a road in Malibu, his legs extending into a lane of traffic.

Working with local residents and law enforcement, the team’s objective is to stabilize sick and injured patients and create trusting relationships with them, the end goal being to help them get into permanent housing. Photo: Margaret Molloy

Dennis, 64, who the Malibu team has been visiting for months, recently decided he is ready for his first permanent home in more than 20 years. Photo: Margaret Molloy

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Carolina Monge was recently elected to Venice Family Clinic’s Board of Directors. A native of Inglewood and a graduate of Ánimo Venice Charter High School, Monge is studying political science at El Camino College and was part of a delegation from the Clinic that traveled to Washington, DC, in September and met with legislators to encourage them to continue funding Early Head Start and community health centers. Her son, Derek, is enrolled in the Clinic’s Children First Early Head Start program.

Mark R. Gavens is a new member of Venice Family Clinic’s Foundation Board. He is the executive vice president of hospital operations and chief operating officer of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where he oversees patient care operations, clinical service lines, and support services, implementing strategies to improve quality, efficiency, and patient satisfaction. Gavens also serves as CEO of Marina Del Rey Hospital, an affiliate of Cedars-Sinai. He will be retiring at the end of the year.

Robert J. Di Vito, JD, CFRE, has joined Venice Family Clinic’s Advisory Board. A nonprofit and health care philanthropy consultant, he specializes in change management, organizational design, and nonprofit board development. Before founding his consultancy, Di Vito held leadership positions with Maryland-based MedStar Health, Piedmont Healthcare Foundation of metropolitan Atlanta, Booz Allen Hamilton Consulting, and the DeKalb County Board of Health.

Naveena Ponnusamy recently joined Venice Family Clinic as its chief development officer, overseeing all of the Clinic’s public and private fundraising efforts. Prior to joining Venice Family Clinic, Ponnusamy was executive director of development at the RAND Corporation, where she led the policy research institute’s fundraising strategy and outreach. She also served in a variety of development leadership roles at the University of Southern California and was the assistant dean, external relations, for the USC Marshall School of Business.

Theresa Farrell has come on board as director of individual and corporate development. She recently served as director of major and planned giving at Goodwill Southern California and has held roles in major giving and stewardship at University of Redlands and University of California, Riverside. Majoring in chemistry at the University of Illinois, Farrell started her career as a scientist, materials engineer, and technical writer.
Providing quality primary health care to people in need.

Venice Family Clinic's associate medical director, Karen Lamp, MD (pictured with Brian Hurley, MD, medical director of substance use related care integration at the LA County Department of Mental Health), was recently awarded the Marvin Southard Award for Integration at the Statewide Conference on Integration for her work in developing Venice Family Clinic’s SUMMIT (Substance Use, Motivation, and Medication Integrated Treatment) program. SUMMIT combines individual and group psychotherapy with medication-assisted treatment for patients with substance use disorders. In 2013, drug overdose was the leading cause of death in LA County among 25- to 44-year-olds and the fourth-leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds.

Artist John Baldessari has continued his longstanding support of the Clinic by creating a limited edition, Hero, 2017, especially for Venice Family Clinic’s Art Walk & Auctions. This edition of 65 is a five-color screenprint on archival pigment print, signed, dated, and numbered on recto. Unframed dimensions are 30” x 22”. To learn more or schedule an in-person viewing, visit vfcshop.com or contact Tiffany Tse, special events manager, at 310.664.7930 or tse@mednet.ucla.edu.

Speaking of Venice Family Clinic’s Art Walk & Auctions, this year’s event—hosted at Google Los Angeles—was the most successful in more than a decade, raising more than $800,000 to provide quality primary health care to people in need. Thank you to the more than 300 artists and 400 volunteers who collaborated to pull it off, as well as the 5,000 culture lovers who attended. Some limited-edition merchandise, designed by famed New York and LA artist Barbara Kruger, is still available at vfcshop.com.
More services, more patients: The Robert Levine Family Health Center reopens

Earlier this year, Venice Family Clinic undertook a renovation and expansion of its Robert Levine Family Health Center, in Venice. Besides adding four new exam rooms, three new counseling rooms, and a new community meeting space, the clinic added a third medical team to provide a range of services well beyond the previous offering of prenatal care and teen health. The site now has capacity for an additional 1,000 patients per year.

The Robert Levine Family Health Center is named for the late father of writer and director Chuck Lorre. The creative force behind such hits as “The Big Bang Theory” and the new “Young Sheldon,” Lorre provided the lead gift to fund much of the renovation. He recently provided the lead gift to fund much of the renovation. He

The grand reopening wasn’t a fundraising event, but Lorre’s gentle encouragement helped raise more than $160,000. Photo: Dan Forer

To view more photos of the grand reopening, visit Venice Family Clinic’s Facebook page: facebook.com/venicefamilyclinic. To arrange a tour of the site, please contact Naveena Ponnusamy, chief development officer, at 310.664.7932 or nponnusamy@mednet.ucla.edu.
Highlights of the 2017–2020 strategic plan

Public health in Los Angeles is at a crossroads. Families are facing rising housing costs, longer commutes, and a fragmented health care system. Medical providers are feeling financial stress and professional burnout. Clinics and hospitals are undergoing a fundamental shift in how they provide care. And insurers and government agencies are changing how they pay for it.

Together, these trends present a unique opportunity to remake the local health care system. Against this backdrop, Venice Family Clinic recently embarked on a new strategic plan, organized into four key areas, each of which seeks to usher in a more responsive social safety net and help improve quality of life for all Angelenos.

Strategy 1: Revolutionary approach to care

What it means
• Implementing a value-based model of care—getting paid for outcomes instead of visits
• Providing new and expanded services, organized better geographically and more comprehensively
• Taking a broader view of health and the forces affecting it

What to expect this year
• More case managers to help patients access specialty care and the services of partner agencies
• Phone visits for select populations to save patients time and open up additional appointments
• Systematic screening for “social determinants of health,” including housing, hunger, and trauma

Strategy 2: Engaged workforce

What it means
• Developing the talents and skills of staff and volunteers
• Making sure staff and volunteers feel appreciated
• Finding new ways to engage staff and volunteers in the success of patients and the organization

What to expect this year
• Collecting information and ideas about staff and volunteer experiences
• Hiring a new staff member focused on talent management

Strategy 3: Purposeful partnerships

What it means
• Working with partners to achieve our shared goals
• Forming new partnerships and strengthening existing ones to ensure adequate services, promote advocacy, and address social needs

What to expect this year
• Creating a patient advisory group
• Working to address basic needs, such as housing and food

Strategy 4: Mission-driven innovation and improvement

What it means
• Strengthening our culture and capabilities in innovation and improvement
• Making innovation and improvement our primary methods of achieving our goals

What to expect this year
• Implementing organization-wide training in innovation and improvement
• Holding an improvement and innovation showcase at the end of the year

Questions about Venice Family Clinic’s strategic plan? Please email vfcinfo@mednet.ucla.edu.

Staff physician Jessica Stroik, MD, performs a phone consultation with a patient undergoing a cure for hepatitis C. These patients could normally require four in-person visits; the phone-visit pilot eliminates two of those and frees up Dr. Stroik to see more patients.

Adam Leibovitch volunteers three days per week, each in a different role. Mondays, he teaches yoga. Wednesdays, he takes vitals. Thursdays, he coordinates specialty care referrals.

The patient portal is one recent innovation, offering online appointment scheduling, lab results, secure communication with providers, and more. To date, more than 8,000 patients have signed up, and about 200 more register each month.

Venice Family Clinic has more than 120 active partnerships. One of those is a new medical-legal partnership with Los Angeles Tenants Union and Eviction Defense Network, which helps patients access legal help when facing eviction.
They’re counting on us.
We’re counting on you.

Your donation to the 30th annual Children’s Holiday Movie provides life-changing and life-saving pediatric services like treatment for asthma and diabetes, one-on-one lactation consultation for new mothers and their babies, individual and family counseling, and exercise and nutrition programs to fight childhood obesity. Make your year-end contribution via the enclosed envelope or online at venicefamilyclinic.org/giving.

More than a greeting, a gift of health.

Give your holiday wishes extra meaning this year by sending them on Artist Cards from Venice Family Clinic. Choose from images by Carlos Almaraz, Barbara Berney, Ed Moses, Matt Mullican, Frank Strasser, and dozens of other topflight artists. Each is a reproduction from an original work donated by the artist. Browse images and order online at vfcshop.com.

In memory of Venice Family Clinic’s recently departed supporters

Brad Grey • Lillian Katz • Susanne Kester • Martin Prince • Raymond Schultze

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Sign up at smile.amazon.com to have 0.5 percent of your eligible Amazon purchases donated. You can also have as much as 4 percent of your grocery bill go to the Clinic—just visit ralphs.com and click “Ralphs Community Contribution Program” at the bottom of the page for instructions. And if you need to make room in your driveway, consider donating your car to Venice Family Clinic for the tax deduction. Go to venicefamilyclinic.org and click on the Ways to Give link in the Donors section.