Spokane’s New Union Gospel Mission Saturday Clinic

Everyone loves a comeback story and Spokane’s new Union Gospel Mission Saturday Clinic is just that. This story began on May 1st of this year, when the old mainstay of service learning in Spokane, the House of Charity (HOC) Saturday Clinic was forced to close its doors. The House of Charity Clinic had offered medical students the opportunity to serve Spokane’s homeless population for many years. Not only were they able to practice their emerging physical exam skills, it also gave them a chance to work in-depth with people experiencing homelessness. The fate of the House of Charity, however, came down to funding issues—federal grants that had historically supported this clinic were now to be diverted to fill other needs in Spokane.

The House of Charity students were not to be deterred, and HOC student volunteers conducted a listening campaign to learn from their patients what possible direction to take in the future. Had the clinic met their needs? What improvements could be made? Was this a viable structure to move forward with? The response from the patients was a resounding “yes”; the HOC patients valued the services, especially diabetes care.

Given this feedback the students felt encouraged to try to find a new venue, and after researching student clinics across the country, decided to take more of a public health/prevention approach.

A small group of student leaders including Margaret Bruce, Tiffany Eisenbach, Daniel Yang, and Sarah McHugh searched for a new location initially speaking with Providence Sacred Heart Hospital, who had supported the House of Charity, but Providence was not able to assist the students until the end of summer, too late to begin a project for the 2017-18 school year.

A chance conversation between Margaret Bruce and volunteer preceptor, Ward Merkeley, M.D., led the group to consider Spokane’s Union Gospel Mission clinic, where Dr. Merkeley was volunteering.

Debate amongst the students about partnering with a religious organization was, according to their faculty advisor Bob Truckner, M.D., an instructive part of the process of opening the clinic; a subsequent meeting with Union Gospel Mission volunteers and staff to learn more about the Mission’s motivations and need led the students to clarify their goals and forge ahead with the partnership.

Dr. Merkeley, a retired ER physician who sees service as the core of his career remains involved with the students.

“Dr. Merkeley has been a great mentor,” said Margaret Bruce. “When you hear about his passion and interest in helping the homeless community, it perks you up and inspires you to move forward.”

At the July 27th meeting of the Service Learning Advisory Committee, an application for the Union Gospel Mission Saturday Clinic was submitted and approved. Through hard work and perseverance the Spokane student leaders have accomplished a great deal in a few short months from identifying a new partner to resolving concerns within their own group to pushing through a pile of paperwork. Not only did they accomplish their goal, they did it in a thoughtful manner, listening closely to the needs of the communities they are partnering with and serving.