

Richmond Child Safety Collaboration – Medical Student Driven Juvenile Justice Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Incarcerated youth often face a complex interplay between their healthcare and incarceration status. This is important to family medicine because youth incarceration is linked to many long-term health disparities including PTSD, substance abuse, mood disorders, and Type II Diabetes¹. Approximately 50-80% have mental health diagnoses and many face interruptions of insurance coverage or medical care during transition periods²⁻³. Moreover, younger ages of incarceration are strongly linked to adverse health outcomes in adulthood^{2,4}. Hence, it will be critical to focus research and resources on this vulnerable population to reduce poor long-term health outcomes and healthcare expenditures.

To address rehabilitation needs and incarceration prevention, many guidelines have been outlined by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and American Psychological Association (APA). These include increasing collaboration between state and local agencies serving youth, substantive discharge plans that coordinate care and resources, and utilization of diversion programs to behavioral health and substance use programs^{2,4-6}.

Our project focuses on how medical students can address proposed guidelines. Richmond Child Safety Collaboration (RCSC) is a medical student-run operation that supports and advocates for youth and their families. Under the Juvenile Justice Initiative, our projects include a) Community initiatives such as attendance of local truancy meetings to connect youth and families to behavioral health resources, substance use disorder treatments, and diversion programs. b) connecting previously incarcerated youth with VCU Health, and c) creating educational opportunities for medical students and residents relating to the juvenile justice system.

INTRODUCTION

RCSC was born out of a need to help protect children from all forms of abuse and advocate for the health, wellness, and well-being of at-risk youth populations by creating long-lasting community partnerships, clinical opportunities, and educational experiences. This project expanded to include foster care and eventually juvenile justice, to tackle the needs of specialized family populations in Richmond. To tackle juvenile justice, we utilize medical students to take on service projects in conjunction with community partners, develop educational curricula, and develop specialized clinics.

Figures

Figure 1: highlights the organizational structure of RCSC with current initiatives and projects



Methods

RCSC is composed of 3 core initiatives: Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention, Juvenile Justice, and Foster Care. Each initiative provides a community, clinical, and educational component (Figure 1). Within Juvenile Justice's community aspect, community connections have been established between Richmond Public School's (RPS) truancy program and the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice's diversion program. Under the truancy program, students are able to connect directly with the family to address medical concerns that may be impacting the family, as well as, connect them to resources that address other social determinants of health. Connection with the diversion program has been made to help continue to identify needs and volunteer opportunities that medical students may be more adept to address.

Under the clinical component, students have reached out to residents and faculty members to establish bandwidth and limitations within VCU Healthcare System. The plan moving forward is creating a system to increase the continuity of care for justice-involved youth to demonstrate how this could possibly decrease the rate of recidivism and long-term health outcomes.

Under the educational component, students are creating a fourth-year elective to rotate with healthcare providers at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center in Chesterfield, VA and develop a writing-based diversion program. In the writing-based diversion program, participants will read books, write reflections, and have class-based discussions. The goal is to provide students with a deeper understanding of the individualized circumstances/challenges which lead to detention and to encourage our youth to reflect on their own experiences.

COMMENT

Medical students have a unique opportunity to address community health concerns through direct services and knowledge dissemination. Additionally, students engaging in such work are more likely to continue efforts as their career advances. RCSC Juvenile Justice Initiative allows students to advocate for community-based alternatives to incarceration that keep young people in their communities and out of secure confinement². Truancy is associated with poor school performance, higher dropout rates, and poor adult health outcomes such as mental health concerns and substance abuse. Based on a study collecting educational records in Mississippi from 2003-2013, youth with chronic absenteeism were 3.5 times more likely to be arrested or referred to the juvenile justice system⁷. Juvenile incarceration is correlated with decreased social functioning and decreased life expectancy¹.

RCSC was created to address the health inequities for families in our local community. Our organization recognizes juvenile detention as a social determinant of health. Students have created community partnerships with the court system and juvenile detention facilities in order to reduce the occurrence and recurrence of incarceration. As a result, students are able to complete direct outreach to families during truancy hearings and are working on establishing a partnership and needs assessment of local diversion programs. Students are also working to implement a continuity of care clinics for foster children and incarcerated youth to directly address this population's healthcare needs. They are creating educational experiences for fellow classmates by designing rotations which allow students to work closely with the medical units within juvenile detention centers. The opportunity to interact with youth and their family will give students a better understanding of this population and be advocates for juvenile justice reform.

CONCLUSION

RCSC is a medical student-led initiative that serves the communities through collaborative partnerships. In doing so, we enact positive change and improve health outcomes in the communities we serve.

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