Maryann Styles and Delores Liggins spotted the first tent while responding to a call from Project HOME’s Outreach Coordination Center in June. As the two outreach workers from Pennsylvania Hospital’s Hall-Mercer Community Mental Health Center engaged its occupant in conversation, they learned he was an organizer who intended to gather all of the city’s homeless individuals into a large, autonomous camp, and he shared a list of demands.

He was initially dismissive of Styles and Liggins’ offers to support him but ultimately agreed that they could help by supplying food and water. This was what opened up the opportunity for their team to help those in need during a historic movement. “In a couple of days, it went from one tent to 10 tents to 40 tents. A lot of homeless clients that we’d been engaging for a while moved down to the Parkway, and we knew it was getting serious,” Styles said.

Inspired by Black Lives Matter protests, activists and unsheltered people came together on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. For five months, more than 200 homeless individuals transformed areas of the city’s iconic boulevard into sprawling tent villages. The dual pandemics that defined 2020 — COVID-19 and systemic racism — and their disproportionate impact on communities of color threw into relief other inequities like housing, fomenting long-standing frustrations in a city with a homeless population of more than 20,000.

As it grew, the encampment was soon embroiled in controversy, but outreach workers from Hall-Mercer’s team played an integral role in clearing the encampment by October and connecting its homeless occupants to temporary shelter options before temperatures dropped. “I think there were many people who saw that encampment as an eyesore, as a place for unwanted people, and a place that they just wanted to disappear. But Hall-Mercer showed up, regardless of all of the barriers,” said Patty Imacker, DSW, MBA, administrator of PAH’s Behavioral Health Service Line. “From day one, their tenacity, commitment, and ability to see the bigger picture made such an impact.”

Building Relationships and Community Bridges “In order for us to get in, we had to maintain the rapport with people we knew and befriended people we didn’t so they’d warm up to us,” Styles said. “We sat down with them and reinforced that whether they were at the encampment or not, whether they were with these organizers or not, we were still going to advocate for them.”

Their warmth and determination paid off. Soon enough, Styles and Liggins weren’t met with resistance as they entered the encampment to distribute backpacks, food, and water but, rather, enthusiastically greeted as “the Muslim girl and the girl with the bun” as they walked through counting tents, assessing situations, and striking up conversations.

For months, Styles, Liggins, and their fellow orange-clad Hall-Mercer staff — Quinton Askew, Crystal Delmonico, Wes Lilly, Joan Yelldhouse, and Tamika Willis — made the Parkway part of their routine. Rather than coming with a set agenda, the outreach workers explained what types of services were available and how they could help each person, such as substance use support, placement in a COVID-19 prevention space for those at high risk for contracting the virus, or bus tickets to get back to their home city. Over time, they built trust and camaraderie. “It didn’t matter if they were homeless for 30 days or 30 years — we advocated for them,” Styles said. “We needed to show them that we were allies, not enemies.”
The benefits of a Home-Cooked Meal Ripple Throughout the Hospital

Asked what she enjoys most about her work, Laura Schlitz says, “Being in a position to have a positive impact on our patients, their families, and my staff.”

A clinical manager of two medical-surgical units at Penn Medicine Chester County Hospital, Schlitz oversees about 140 employees. However, she’s a nurse by training, and she’s spent much of her career working in emergency departments. Her experiences there have shaped her empathy in countless ways.

In particular, her work with the hospital’s organ donation program has given rise to a volunteer effort that has bonded抬头 to dozens of hospital employees over the last few years.

In 2017, Schlitz attended a one-day learning session hosted by the Gift of Life Donor Program and first heard of the Home Cook Heroes program. Volunteer groups are invited to cook dinner (and brunch, on the weekends) at the Gift of Life Family House in Philadelphia, which creates a home away from home for transplant patients and their families who travel to Philadelphia for transplant-related care.

Another nurse who attended the learning session with Schlitz said, “We only ever get to see the sad side of this process [after a donor has died]. It would be nice to meet and help some of the people whose lives are being transformed by these transplants.” Schlitz agreed. They decided then and there to sign up for dinner duty one night.

From that moment, Schlitz has been hooked.

“It felt like such a great way to help people, and it was kind of a therapeutic thing for our group, too,” she says. “Everyone there that night was so appreciative. There was also the added benefit of doing something together that we loved, cooking, which brought us a little closer as the community. I left the hospital parking lot together around 3 p.m. and headed for the Family House.”

Once inside those walls, the concerns of the outside world faded, Schlitz says. All that mattered was feeding their gathering guests of all ages for whom a home-cooked meal was perhaps their one glimpse of normalcy in their entire day.

“All of the outside world faded, Schlitz says. All that mattered was feeding their gathering guests of all ages for whom a home-cooked meal was perhaps their one glimpse of normalcy in their entire day.

“Everyone eats in a large dining room. Sometimes, we sit with them while they eat,” she says. “As nurses, it’s in our nature to talk with people, ask them how they are.”

After everyone finished their dinner, Schlitz and the other volunteers would gather in a corner of the dining room to eat theirs. For all the 12-hour shifts they work together, week in and week out, there was rarely time to catch up on each other’s lives. But this became that time.

The in-person cooking and dining aspect of the Home Cook Heroes program has been temporarily suspended since the spring due to COVID-19, but the spirit of sharing for families in need goes on. In lieu of their monthly dinners, the Penn Medicine Chester County Hospital Home Cook Heroes have dropped off prepared meals on multiple occasions. One month, everyone shipped in $20, and they had dinner delivered from a nearby Italian restaurant.

If you’re interested in volunteering with or contributing to the hospital’s group once the kitchens reopen, email Schlitz at Laura.Schlitz@pennmedicine.upenn.edu.

Extraordinary Efforts Help Resolve Historic Homeless Encampment

COVID, Cynicism, and Other Challenges

Many encampment occupants expressed that the camp was comfortable, collaborative, and peaceful. However, violence did occasionally break out. Further safety issues were posed by severe storms, drug use, individuals struggling with mental illnesses, improper waste disposal, and the ongoing pandemic. Though masks were generally ubiquitous, as more tents were staked and more protestors joined the cause, social distancing became a concern. Plus, one of the core difficulties was the suspicion and hostility aimed towards all outsiders, including police, clergy, reporters, city officials, and even people walking down the street. Liggins and Styles were unfazed, though, it was all part of a day’s work.

“We weren’t afraid of the encampment, largely because we’d already established relationships previously with many of the people who came down there. We could walk in and just say, ‘Hey Greg, how are you?’ ‘What’s up, Roger, how’s everything?’ and move along,” Liggins said. “Even with COVID, we just made sure that we were masked, shielded, and gloved up, and we carried bags of masks and hand sanitizers with us. Sure, it was scary sometimes, but who else was going to help?”

Still, the camp’s ever-growing size coupled with the lack of centralized leadership meant that sometimes they were caught up in conflict. Liggins recalled one situation in which she and Styles had successfully persuaded a man to leave with them and go to a shelter but they were almost immediately followed by others.

“As soon as we got this guy to our van to go pick up his things [from another area], an organizer stopped us and pulled him to the side and tried to talk him out of going,” she said. Recognizing that the organizer’s distrust of the shelter system could cause the man to miss a good opportunity, she stood her ground, which — after hours of debate — led to a breakthrough.

“His argument made sense in its own way, but I emphasized that we weren’t there to harm the cause, we came in peace. I explained that this organizer might be able to go home every night, but this man didn’t have that option. What if the protest ended tomorrow, but this man already gave up his spot? We were professional but bold. When we didn’t back down, and the man agreed to come with us, the organizer actually said he really respected that we would not leave without him.”

Securing Shelter as Solutions Unfold

Three eviction notices were issued to the encampment, but residents and protestors refused to leave until permanent housing was provided — an increasingly urgent need amid the nationwide COVID eviction crisis. Fortunately, city officials were committed to resolving the protest without force. The city and the Philadelphia Housing Authority agreed to turn over 50 vacant properties to a community land trust; by the spring, these houses will be owned and rehabilitated by a nonprofit established by encampment organizers and occupants and will be maintained as low-income housing. The city has also promised to create two tiny-house villages by June 30.

This settlement was lauded by local and national advocates as an unprecedented success — though it’s important to remember that these solutions will take time, and they will not fully resolve the city’s housing and homelessness crisis. That’s where the outreach work comes in again. As officials and organizers met at the negotiation table, Styles, Liggins, and their colleagues diligently engaged with each person at the camp, offering daily support until people finally felt ready to seek help.

“There was a table outside of the encampment where stuff from the Department of Behavioral Health [DBH] were stationed to share information about outreach services and shelters. Depending on each case, our team would bring interested people over to that table, or they’d just send a text to DBH to claim an available bed,” said program manager Maryanne Bourbeau, MS. “Usually, there’d be some wait time to approve placements, but with the encampment, it was instantaneous because the goal was to connect everyone with entry-level housing as quickly as possible.”

By the time the last tent had been cleared, DBH reported that the combined efforts of the city’s outreach teams led to 205 relocations into shelters, safe havens, COVID-19 prevention spaces, and other housing and treatment programs.

“Hall-Mercer was there from the first tent to the last tent. Every day, we were out there securing beds, packing people up, and dropping them off at shelters. It was all about having compassion for people who have been held back from resources that could help,” Styles said. Styles echoed this sentiment, adding, “No matter who they were or how they got to that encampment, we were there to make sure they got what they needed.”

Continued from page 1
The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of our day-to-day lives — and our physical fitness routines are no exception. Restrictions on fitness facilities, lack of and/or inadequate equipment and home workout fatigue have resulted in decreased physical activity. This is especially true for employees who are working long hours on the front lines or who are balancing the challenges of an at-home work environment.

Movefocused, a movement program created by the UPHS Welfocused team, provides employees with an opportunity to prioritize their physical fitness, despite the challenges of the pandemic. Through Movefocused, employees have the opportunity to meet Mitch Sherman, employee health and well-being specialist at UPHS for a one-on-one virtual fitness consultation. A certified strength and condition specialist and certified exercise physiologist, Sherman provides safe and effective guidance for employees at all fitness levels. “In the midst of the pandemic, gyms are closed and people are working tirelessly in health care facilities or at home,” Sherman said. “This requires increased strength and endurance to handle long shifts on your feet or increased physical activity to offset a sedentary lifestyle. Exercise has been shown to be a mood booster, too. This is particularly important during such a chaotic and stressful time.”

Now that we’ve turned the page on 2020, the healthful resolutions, good wishes and positive plans for 2021 are in full swing. Getting healthy or improving one’s health always seems to be a constant on many people’s lists, but how to stick to the plan may not.

In February 2021, the new and improved Welfocused app can help with that. “The new Welfocused app promotes wellness accountability — which we could all use a little more of,” said Janna Rothschild, senior employee health and well-being coordinator of UPHS. “The unexpected twists and turns of 2020 left people feeling a little ungrounded when it came to their healthy lifestyle regimen.”

“I love the team challenges on the app, specifically the step challenge,” said Emily McPeak, UPHS employee well-being coordinator. “Logging into the app daily reminds employees to make better decisions so they can earn points toward an extra $200.”

All employees, regardless of their medical coverage, are eligible to earn the annual incentive of up to $200 after downloading the app. In addition, several random employees who download the new app will be named winners of the Golden Ticket challenge and will receive bonus points toward their incentive reward. “The best care for our patients starts with the best care for our employees, so once February comes around, get started by downloading the Limeade ONE iOS or Android app. Access the program on the web: pennmedicine.limeade.com. To learn more about the app, email wellfocused@uphs.upenn.edu. For questions about registering your account, please email support@limeade.com or call 888.849.4846.

Key Benefits of the New Welfocused App
- Improve work and personal life with activities and personalized insights
- Track progress and activity against your goals
- Share feedback and provide suggestions on key workplace topics
- Stay connected to colleagues with posts, likes and comments
- Keep up with health system updates and pertinent news on your mobile device
- Access resources and company resources in a centralized location
- Connect devices and apps, such as Apple Health

Since Movefocused’s rollout, employees have benefited from virtual consultations. “I was excited to sign up for a Movefocused session to guide me through my physical activity — the one constant that has kept me sane during the pandemic,” said Marion Miranda, senior business process education consultant in Corporate Services.

Whether it is incorporating exercises into scheduled breaks during the workday, revamping existing workout plans or alternating exercises to produce strength gains, Movefocused can help you maintain and improve your physical fitness. Miranda goes Movefocused a full-throated endorsement based on her experience. “The program is extremely beneficial to Penn Medicine employees who are already stretched to their limits — professionally and personally — as it gives you a resource who is knowledgeable and practical. In times when you just do not know where to start or feel overwhelmed, or when you fall off the wagon again, Movefocused is available to give you the roadmap.”

Register for Movefocused today through Penn Cobalt: https://www.penncobalt.com/sign-in.
THE COVID-19 VACCINE: HOPE FOR A NEW BEGINNING

From CEO Kevin Mahoney

imagine the devastation if we opt out of this scientific revelation.

But beyond vaccine development, the pandemic has accelerated innovation in countless ways. It has underscored the timelessness of our work. Everyone who has fought against COVID-19, whether in the lab or at the bedside in our hospitals or in countless roles across our health system that support our mission to care and to share with our community why the work is so important.

We are working to provide answers and guidance to everyone, and to encourage honest conversations no matter your perspective or your personal choices. We welcome you to ask questions and seek out guidance from Penn Medicine experts. You’ll see people across our health system wearinghurst promoting conversations. ‘Ask me about the COVID-19 Vaccine.’ We want you to share your stories, your worries, your questions — and to get the facts. It’s your right to make informed decisions about your health and we are here to help.

To me, believing in the COVID-19 vaccine is to believe in the power, rigor, and process of science. The foundation for that science was developed right here at Penn Medicine nearly 20 years ago through key discoveries at the Perelman School of Medicine that made a whole new type of vaccine and treatments for numerous diseases a possibility — including the new COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. After testing in clinical trials across the world, we know these vaccines are safe, and that the benefits of receiving it greatly outweigh the risks — especially the risks of contracting COVID-19.

But there’s many more people in our workforce who are here to be a resource if you want to know more. Our colleagues, Florence Grew Polite, MD, chief of the Division of General Internal Medicine, and Denice Koss, MD, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases, are just one among many impassioned ambassadors who are at the ready to talk with those looking for accurate information and to share their story of why they trust the vaccine — and why it will be crucial to averting the disproportionate toll of COVID-19 on her own Black community.

‘Like many Black physicians,’ Polite wrote in a powerful column in The Era, ‘I have been vocal about the need to address our community directly to own the past mistakes of the medical profession, to acknowledge the current disparities that exist in health care and to share with our community why we think this vaccine is not only important, but vital in the efforts to decrease the destruction of the coronavirus.

I trust this science behind the vaccine and I hope that when the time comes for the vaccine to become available to the public, that my community will be ready to trust the medical profession again. I can only imagine the devastation if we opt out of this scientific revelation.

Beyond the vaccine development, the pandemic has accelerated innovation in countless ways. It has underscored the timelessness of our work. Everyone who has fought against COVID-19, whether in the lab or at the bedside in our hospitals or in countless roles across our health system that support our mission to care and to share with our community why the work is so important.

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