

Improving Mental Health Competence at LifeMoves, a Homeless Shelter Network

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ABSTRACT

Background: A large barrier experienced by staff at LifeMoves -- the largest homeless shelter network in Silicon Valley -- is addressing their clients' psychiatric and behavioral health disorders. LifeMoves leadership acknowledges that this is partially due to stigma and lack of knowledge, but would like to explore other contributing factors. Thus, the purpose of this project was two-fold: first, to explore barriers to successful client encounters around mental health; and second, to improve staff knowledge of disorders and skills for addressing emergent and non-emergent psychiatric situations.

Approach: In order to reach these goals, we performed semi-structured focus groups, and co-created a psychiatric and behavioral health first aid training program with LifeMoves staff. Moreover, a 13 question pre- and post- training survey was administered to assess improvement in knowledge of psychiatric and behavioral health disorders.

Results: The focus group revealed that the largest barriers to successful client encounters around mental health were knowledge of psychiatric disorders, lack of accessibility to care, and negative client perceptions of psychiatric and behavioral health care. Furthermore, analysis of the pre- and post-training survey demonstrated an improvement from an average score of 63% to 88% following the training session (p-value = 0.00002).

Conclusions: The findings of the focus groups highlight the need for increased access to psychiatric care for unhoused individuals and increased client education. Additionally, psychiatric and behavioral first aid training is a successful starting point for the improvement of staff knowledge and can serve as a tool for other organizations that work with unhoused individuals.

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