

Street medicine program cares for homeless by Jasmine Gallup

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Providing medical care to people experiencing homelessness is especially important amid the coronavirus pandemic, said Dr. William Hall, a primary care physician.

Hall, who retired in 2017 after 30 years in practice, walked through downtown Tuesday to provide basic check-ups on people who are “sleeping rough,” as he calls it. The free healthcare is part of the H-3 street medicine program he founded last year, which aims to prevent and treat pre-existing medical conditions such as diabetes, hypertension or heart disease.

These health conditions are higher among people who are homeless, which also puts them at greater risk of complications should they contract COVID-19, according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

So far, Hall hasn’t diagnosed a case of COVID-19 in any of his patients; a bit of luck, he said, since the traditional methods of mitigating the spread aren’t available to the homeless.

“How do you quarantine someone who sleeps next to a dumpster?” he said. “Fortunately, we haven’t had to deal with that.”

For many people experiencing homelessness, health concerns take a back seat to finding food and shelter, Hall said.

“If you’re a rough sleeper, you’ve got more on your mind than ‘Gee, is my cholesterol too high?’” he said. “Granted, some are concerned about that, but for most it’s, ‘Where am I gonna get my food? How am I gonna guard my stuff?’”

Hall said he’s made an effort to educate his patients about the pandemic and teach them how to wear masks appropriately, but many “march to their own drummer.” Hall’s goal is simply to help as much as possible when he sees patients.

As part of the street medicine program, Hall also runs a free clinic at the Bread of Life Ministries on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Bread of Life board member Wayne Chew said since COVID-19 hit, the number of people visiting the free clinic, food pantry and shelter has tripled.

The need increased this summer as people lost their jobs because of the pandemic, he said. Many of the families who receive food from Bread of Life are currently living in hotels and may eventually run out of money and end up without shelter, Chew said.

The increase in demand and simultaneous dip in donations has put a strain on the nonprofit’s resources, according to Chew. As Bread of Life prepares for winter, it’s seeking donations of masks, hand sanitizer, underwear, socks and white T-shirts.

The street medicine program is in need of vitamins and minerals, cold and cough medicine and sealed, unopened over-the-counter pharmacy products.

Donations can be dropped off at Bread of Life Ministries, 219 Maple Ave., Sanford, or checks can be mailed to P.O. Box 175, Sanford, NC 27331.