



A Student Volunteer Program Takes Patient Satisfaction to the Next Level

Rural cancer programs face unique and challenging barriers ranging from limited healthcare access to scarcity of health-care providers.¹ The Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program in rural Eureka, California, is one such program. Eureka is situated in the heart of the majestic redwoods in Humboldt County, 272 miles north of San Francisco, with a population of 135,727.² The nearest cancer program is 150 miles southeast, making Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program the only option for three rural Northern California counties. St. Joseph created a fully accredited Commission on Cancer (CoC) cancer program in 1992. Throughout the years we began to more fully understand the unique barriers facing this cancer program, and in 2007 St. Joseph Health Humboldt requested that a local task force propose significant expansion of the program to include support services and additional oncology staff. Their vision was “to ensure the enhancement and modernization of the existing cancer program to best meet the needs of the community.”³ The task force’s goal was to improve the facility so that it would be recognized as “a source of coordinated, comprehensive, state-of-the-art cancer care, delivered with respect and compassion.”³

The Vision for a Rural Cancer Program

According to the Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program’s 2014 needs assessment, about 60 percent of its patients received some type of cancer care outside of Humboldt County.¹ Prominent breast surgeon and medical director of the Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program Ellen Mahoney, MD, championed the vision of delivering state-of-the-art medical care comparable to any large urban cancer center, such as Stanford Medical Center in Palo Alto, Calif., eliminating the need for patients to travel

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hours for treatment. Thus, a main programmatic goal was to increase patient quality of life (QOL) by enabling patients to receive their cancer treatment close to home. The cancer program has been actively pursuing this goal with excellent outcomes while seeing exponential market growth.

To help meet this goal, Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program expanded its radiation oncology service line with the recent acquisition of two new linear accelerators and a 3D mammography machine. Cancer program staff and clinicians include experienced, certified medical and radiation oncologists, certified oncology nurses, oncology and clinical social workers, mental health clinicians, a financial counselor, nurse navigators, and a registered dietitian. Additionally, the cancer program has STAR (Survivorship Training and Rehabilitation) certified physical therapists, oncology nurses, and social workers. Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program has an ongoing partnership with Stanford University to do telemedicine conferencing and patient case consults. In short, patients can be confident that they are receiving the quality of cancer care they would receive at a large university medical center.



Beautiful Eureka Marina on Humboldt Bay.

Barriers to Care in the Rural Setting

A long-term goal of Dr. Mahoney's was to leverage volunteers and student interns from the local university, Humboldt State University. In the absence of a large university medical center in the area, a collaboration with the local state university was an attractive option for creating an oncology learning environment for students. April Alexander, MSW, ASW, was the first student to intern for the program. She obtained her undergraduate and graduate degrees in social work from Humboldt State University while interning in Cancer Support Services at Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program. Her master's project was a collaboration with oncologists to create a psychosocial intervention manual for patients in treatment for cancer. The manual included substantial information on barriers to care in a rural cancer program, with these five main barriers identified:

1. Lack of certified oncologists
2. Proximity to cancer care
3. Poverty
4. Lack of and reduced access to medical insurance
5. Disparities in health outcomes among minority populations.

After graduation, Ms. Alexander was hired as the oncology social worker in Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program's Medical Oncology department.

The St. Joseph Health Humboldt Cancer Program's 2014 community needs assessment identified four of these five areas as barriers to care (excluding lack of certified oncologists). Because of these barriers, the cancer program potentially faces challenges with inadequate disease prevention, delayed detection of illness, misdiagnosis and late diagnosis, and inadequate referral processes without adequate intervention. These barriers are continually being addressed by St. Joseph Health Humboldt Cancer Program's Cancer Committee through quality assurance and prevention initiatives, as well as close collaboration with local medical community agencies and organizations.

Humboldt County and its surrounding counties have one of the largest indigenous populations in California. The county is home to the Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, Tolowa, and Hoopa tribes. Humboldt State University Social Work Department's BASW and MSW programs emphasize working with indigenous peoples, which became an integral part of April's master's project. The project explored barriers to healthcare and health disparities faced by these communities as a result of past colonialism and cultural genocide, which continue to negatively impact indigenous communities today. These barriers to care remain in the forefront of social justice issues that rural health communities should be examining and addressing within their patient populations. Eliminating barriers to care in these populations is paramount to improving social work practice in cancer care delivery.

Student Volunteers Improve Quality of Care

Quality of care is a constant priority for cancer programs—both rural and urban. The Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program has expanded in the past three years with another local oncology practice joining the cancer program, thus increasing the patient to staff ratio. The addition of volunteers would help provide higher quality of care for the patients and reduce tasks for the oncology nurses while also improving quality of care for patients. Ms. Alexander interned in the infusion clinic during her graduate year in the Humboldt State University social work program and saw the need to create a volunteer program for the clinic. Still attending the university, she had close connections with the social work professors and staff, so approaching them about student volunteers was a natural progression. One of the classes taught in the social work bachelor's program curriculum was a volunteer experience class. Ms. Alexander approached the class professor, who was happy to recommend five student volunteers in the social work bachelor's program. This collaboration would prove beneficial for both the university and the cancer program.

The Ins & Outs of Training Student Volunteers

Students are encouraged to begin the volunteer application process as early as possible in the semester because completion of required background checks and medical tests can take a substantial amount of time. After an initial interview by the MSW, students complete their hospital volunteer orientation, which includes a full background check, immunizations, a physical, and drug testing. Secondly, students complete a full day of hospital volunteer training led by hospital managers and directors. They then go through additional cancer program training, which includes the cancer program's history, active listening, and psychosocial and chairside training conducted by the cancer program's MSW. Lastly, students complete on-site training with the infusion clinic's medical assistant to learn hands-on clinic tasks and safety protocols. All training hours count toward the students' volunteer hours for their class.

In collaboration, the Cancer Support Services manager, infusion clinic charge nurse, volunteer director, and MSW identified the following infusion clinic volunteer tasks:

- Disinfecting chemo chairs.
- Bringing patients in from the waiting room.
- Accompanying patients out to their car.
- Obtaining drinks, blankets, and other items.
- Delivering lunches.
- Offering psychosocial support to patients and caregivers.
- Getting DVD players, coloring supplies, books, etc.
- Giving out basic resources, such as support group flyers.
- Reporting patient concerns to social workers and clinical staff.
- Helping medical assistants and nurses with deliveries to the lab.
- Stocking of non-clinical supplies.
- Copying and organizational office tasks.
- Assisting with community outreach and events.

In the initial volunteer days, the MSW introduces the students to patients and ensures that students are rounding in the clinic and meeting both the psychosocial and practical needs of patients while assisting the clinic staff. Students utilize AIDET (Acknowledge, Introduce, Duration, Explanation, and Thank You) with patients and learn to work with the infusion nurses and cancer program staff. Students are also encouraged to embody the four St. Joseph values of service, excellence, dignity, and justice while interacting with patients.

The MSW conducts a daily check-in with the students, schedules volunteer meetings as needed, and utilizes text messaging and email correspondence with students to improve communication. To obtain input on the volunteer program, regular communication with the cancer program staff and clinic charge nurse has been helpful. Per the hospital's volunteer policy, students are not permitted to perform clinical duties; per the program's dress policy, students wear "student volunteer" name tags while in the clinic. Students do not have access to the EHR (electronic health record) or any HIPAA-protected patient clinical information. If volunteers are sick or unable to volunteer, they are asked to find a replacement, if possible. The minimum volunteer commitment

is one year; students can take vacations and school breaks as needed. Students are also encouraged to assist with cancer program community events, such as health fairs, prevention activities, and education opportunities, and are invited to visit cancer program staff meetings and tumor boards. Tasks such as filing and copying are kept to a minimum to maximize the students' learning experience. Students are also encouraged to propose ideas for projects; one idea included utilizing a former dental hygienist's oral hygiene guide for patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Impact of the Student Volunteer Program

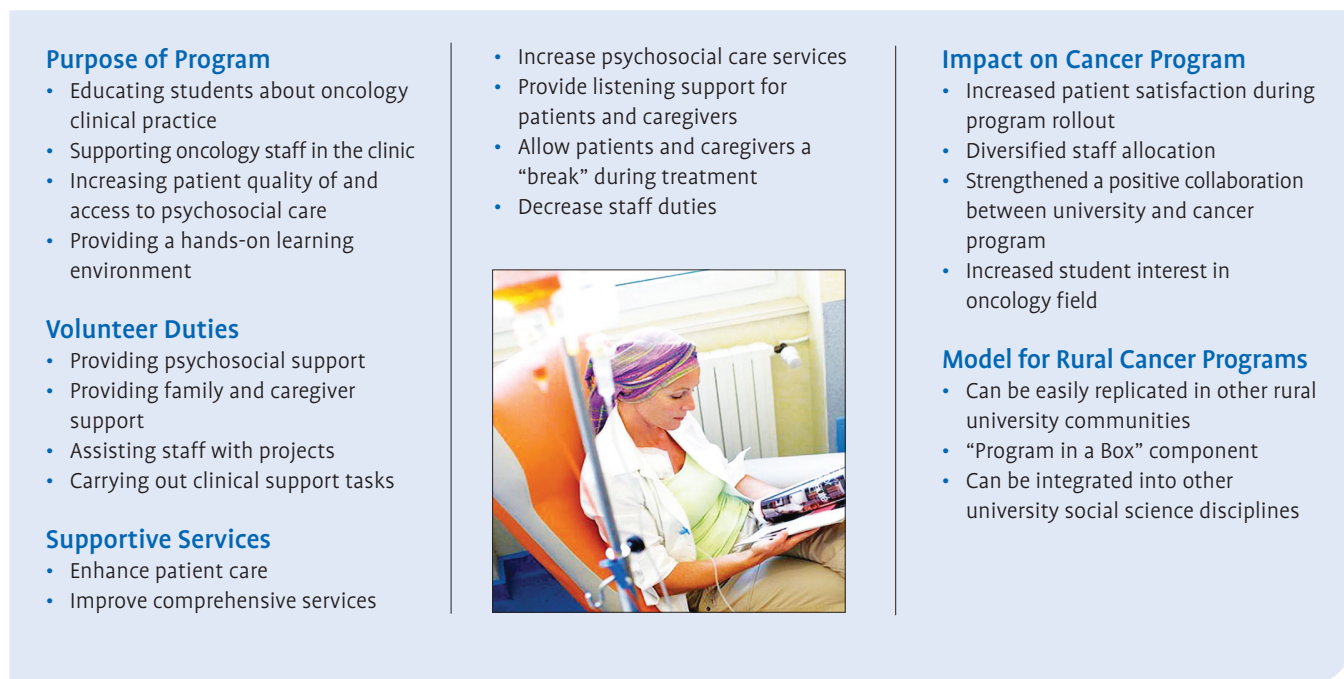
The program is currently in its third year, and is continuing to exceed the expectations of cancer program staff and leadership. It has proven to be a very positive collaboration between the university and cancer program. Students are given the opportunity to immerse themselves in a clinical environment with hands-on learning to increase their interest in the oncology field and hone their social work skills. One student described the volunteer experience as "life-changing," and most of the student volunteers' feedback has been very positive. The Humboldt State University Social Work Department Field Director Yvonne Doble, MSW, is now working with the cancer program and has added the program to the list of intern sites for the BSW and MSW programs. Every year the cancer program has the opportunity to come and speak to the junior year social work students about internship possibilities and familiarize them with the student volunteer program and what it has to offer.

The hospital and cancer program have both benefited substantially from the student volunteer program since its creation. For example, diversified staff allocation has been one benefit of adding volunteers to the program. The student volunteers have also had a positive effect on patient care; during the first-year



Providence St. Joseph Health Humboldt Eureka Hospital Campus.

Figure 1. Rural Chemotherapy Clinic Student Volunteer Support Program



pilot program the cancer program saw an improvement in patient satisfaction scores. To date, the tangible benefits of the student volunteer program have included:

- Improvement of patient care
- Expansion of comprehensive services
- Increase in psychosocial care offered
- Additional listening support for patients
- Assistance with staff duties.

The hospital's volunteer department plans to use the cancer program's student volunteer training manual binder as a prototype for the other departments so that each department will have its own specialized training manual and program. These volunteer opportunities will improve patient care across all hospital departments.

Patients have benefited from the student volunteer program in many ways. For example, patients have more support while they are in the clinic, allowing family members and caretakers to take needed breaks while their loved one is getting an infusion. Patients form supportive relationships with the student volunteers who have more time to sit and talk with them than the clinic staff generally do. Their needs are met more quickly due to the additional volunteers who are available to get a pillow, drink, or movie. Since the student volunteers are not clinical staff, some patients feel more comfortable opening up and discussing their cancer journey with them. Student volunteers have come up with creative activities for patients to pass the time while they're getting an infusion, including a rolling coloring cart, which holds coloring and art supplies, books, and other creative outlets that are offered to patients during their infusion.

Lessons Learned

For cancer programs looking to implement a similar student volunteer program, Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program offers these lessons learned.


#1. The Importance of Program Monitoring. One of the biggest lessons gleaned from the student volunteer program has been the need for continuous program monitoring and readjustment to meet the changing needs of the rural oncology infusion clinic. An increase in patient visits, decrease in staff, or changes to hospital policy are to be expected, and programmatic changes must be made to best meet the needs of the current patient population. Something important to keep in mind is that volunteers are not a replacement for staff, but rather an extension to the services staff provides, and clinic staff should be made aware of this fact. Remember, students are volunteering for a learning experience and are not available all year round, while on semester breaks, etc. Cancer program management and staff should provide continual guidance and input into the student volunteer program process, thereby ensuring its continual success and sustainability. Additionally, university grants can often be used to help pay for student immunizations, physicals, screenings, and tests.

#2. Communication Is Key. Keeping tabs on the pulse of the student volunteer program includes regular communication with management and clinical staff and practitioners, students, and university professors and faculty. Working with the students on their learning agreements and incorporating their ideas into these agreements helps to promote buy-in. Providence St. Joseph Health

Cancer Program has found that assisting students in acclimating to a clinical environment and developing their people skills and sensitivity to oncology patients' needs quickly becomes paramount to providing good patient care. Additional training or "refresher courses" may be needed to ensure students are understanding their volunteer role and providing the best assistance possible. Reminding clinic staff of what students can and cannot do per hospital policy is also helpful in making sure that the policy is being followed appropriately. Regular appreciation of student volunteers is vital to maintaining the program, and meetings, daily check-ins, and expressions of gratitude go a long way toward ensuring confidence and trust in the student volunteers. It's also helpful to make student volunteers aware of their duties by giving them daily checklists to keep them focused on daily volunteer duties.

#3 Self-Care Focus Increases Program Sustainability. Focusing on self-care and being cognizant of personal transference are important aspects of the students' learning experience. Burnout and compassion fatigue are rampant in the medical and social work fields, so training students early on about how to minimize these conditions while they are volunteering at the cancer program is vital. Students need to be educated on how patient interactions can trigger internal emotions and feelings, which may be difficult or confusing to process. Student volunteers also need to learn how to work through these emotions in a healthy way. Students volunteers are encouraged to practice good self-care by taking breaks and communicating with supervisors or professors when concerns arise; they are generally very open to being mentored in the necessity of self-care. Self-care plans, workshops, journaling, support groups, and education are all healthy avenues for increasing adequate levels of self-care. Student volunteers also learn how to establish good boundaries with the patients and caregivers they serve while maintaining a professional relationship. The student volunteer experience may well be their first introduction to the medical social work field and oncology care; therefore, it's critical that those supervising the student volunteers create a solid foundation for them and communicate that caring for themselves is a vital part of sustainability in the healthcare field.

#4 The Sky is the Limit. A student volunteer program provides amazing multi-factorial support to the students, staff, and patients of a cancer program. It can also prove to be a positive collaboration among social work, psychology, and/or hospital cancer programs. In fact, cancer programs may want to consider establishing a similar partnership with a nursing program. Though a student volunteer program requires a time investment on the part of both the university and hospital, Providence St. Joseph Health Cancer Program found that the payback is deeply rewarding for the university, patients, and hospital staff. A student volunteer program can serve to increase the interest of students in the field of oncology and train up a new oncology work force. Additionally, other hospital departments that do not have specialized volunteer training programs can also benefit. For rural cancer programs especially, student volunteer programs are a great solution for meeting unique community needs. Simply put, the positive impact that properly

trained and supported student volunteers can have on oncology staff, cancer patients, and caregivers cannot be underestimated. 

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April Alexander, MSW, (back row, third from left) with infusion center nurses and clinic staff, showing appreciation for infusion clinic student volunteers.