

'Life' on the line

One local parish is pioneering a way to help people on the street keep track of their medical records and health care needs



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOWNTOWN CHAPEL

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How much good can a small red pouch, zip tie and sheet of paper do for someone living on the streets? Turns out, a lot.

Downtown Chapel is pioneering an innovative, potentially life-saving program for medically vulnerable people experiencing homelessness called the Vial of Life program. It's actually an adaptation of a nationally established program used by people who have homes, applied now to those who do not.

Homeless participants can fill out a one-page sheet listing medical illnesses, prescriptions, emergency contacts, allergies and blood type, stuff it into a red plastic pouch no bigger than an index card, and attach it to their backpack. The "vial" provides an easily identifiable, relatively reliable record to emergency personnel, and Downtown Chapel keeps a copy in case the original is lost.

Since June, around 40 homeless individuals have participated in the Vial of Life program at Downtown Chapel, meeting one-on-one for a few minutes with volunteer nursing students from University of Portland who help them fill out medical information and even call pharmacies if

there are questions about prescriptions.

Reviews by participants have been "over the moon," says Andrew Noethe, pastoral associate at Downtown Chapel who is overseeing the implementation of the Vial of Life program in collaboration with parish nurse Sharon Christenson. Participant Michelle says she recommends it to other friends on the street who have seizures or diabetes and thinks there should be "a lot more awareness" about the Vial of Life program.

So far, people seem eager to sign up for the program. "When you're vulnerable and sick, you know it," says Michelle.

Diabetes, seizures and cognitive disabilities are at the top of the list of health issues that the Vial of Life program hopes to track. The health record may be largely self-reported, but the volunteer nursing students at Downtown Chapel "help ask the right questions in a safe place," says Noethe. "Sometimes a participant will just open their bag and show a nurse all the pills they've been taking, and that's helpful if EMTs pick that person up," he says.

Piloted with Northwest Parish Nurse Ministries

and Providence Health Systems, the Vial of Life program is an enormous boon for homeless health care in Portland. Street Roots' series on traumatic brain injuries, including our story "The good, the bad and the ugly — tracking health care for the homeless" (Street Roots, June 24), outlined how tracking and addressing health care on the streets is a nationwide struggle, with rare success and common complaints of cost, time and privacy hurdles.

People who are homeless are often mobile, without health insurance, especially vulnerable to injuries and illness, and prime candidates for reduced recollection, often the result of past trauma or head injuries.

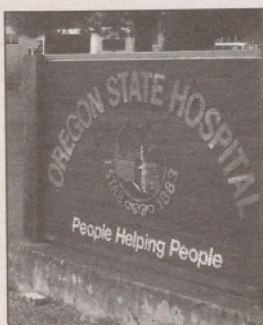
Emergency personnel, including EMTs, police and Central City Concern's CHIERS staff, are frequently forced to rely on guesswork when it comes to helping sick people on the streets.

For instance, last year more than 8,400 inebriated people were picked up off the streets and taken to Hooper Sobering Center on NE Burnside and MLK. "One of the first questions

Read more about health care challenges for people experiencing homelessness through our series on traumatic brain injury. Past stories are available at www.streetroots.wordpress.com

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