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2 with the Cincinnati Homeless Coalition

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- 1 • How can medical students understand social determinants of health within their community? #SDOH
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1 **INTRODUCTION.**

2 When faced with the heavy focus most medical schools place on academic studies in preclinical years, it can
3 be challenging for medical students to branch out into their community and search for areas in healthcare that
4 lack support. Branching out into the community can provide students with an understanding of social
5 determinants of health: non-medical factors, such as income and education, that can influence health
6 outcomes. The following piece is my experience understanding social determinants by building a relationship
7 with a community partner, and how similar experiences can benefit medical students in every community.
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9 As part of the Physician and Society course at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, students are
10 paired with community partners to identify and approach a problem from a healthcare perspective. Our
11 student group was partnered with the Cincinnati Homeless Coalition, an organization focused on eradicating
12 homelessness in the city through offering services, educating the community, and advocating for policy
13 change.
14

15 As a first-year medical student only a few weeks into my higher education, I wondered why my school was
16 abruptly throwing me into an experience outside of the classroom. I contemplated if our time would be better
17 spent focusing on preparing for the rigor of preclinical coursework.
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1 **EXPERIENCE**

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3 **Initial Encounter:**

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5 Before our group could develop a project, we needed to understand the goals of the Cincinnati Homeless
6 Coalition to identify an issue pertinent to their ongoing efforts. Our first two meetings were simply
7 conversations with staff at the Coalition, all of whom had empowering background stories that led to them
8 dedicating their life to serving those experiencing homelessness.

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10 Listening to the first-hand accounts of individuals facing homelessness gave me important insight into the
11 everyday struggles hundreds of thousands of Americans face. However, I still lacked in full understanding of
12 its connection to healthcare, but the final staff member who spoke with us changed my outlook completely.

13

14 Like the other staff members, she faced homelessness her entire life - living on the streets, in abandoned
15 buildings, and even in some of the Coalition's shelters. She explained how her partner had diabetes but did
16 not have access to a primary care physician. He instead relied on infrequently offered free medical clinics with
17 no continuity or relationship building between physicians and their patients. Today, while she dedicates much
18 of her time to helping the Coalition, she continues to face housing and healthcare insecurity as she still
19 frequently relocates and relies on those same free clinics.

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21 As a group, we wanted to conduct secondary research into the relationship between homelessness and
22 inadequate healthcare. We decided to examine several variables such as redlining, lack of green space
23 access, lack of health insurance, lack of access to quality food, etc. For example, many individuals who face
24 homelessness lack access to reliable transportation, a necessity that causes a delay in health care¹. This can
25 be harmful for those with exacerbations in chronic disease and those who have more acute healthcare needs.

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27 **Project Development:**

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29 Now recognizing the impact homelessness often has on individual health outcomes, we wanted to bring
30 awareness to this relationship. Our original project idea involved distributing a brochure around the University
31 of Cincinnati undergraduate campus which included information about both the Coalition's efforts and ways to
32 get involved with their organization. However, we felt we could make an even larger impact by increasing
33 awareness specifically in the healthcare community. We then decided to host a presentation in the medical
34 school which covered the Coalition's efforts and their connection to the healthcare needs of the community.

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36 Our presentation had two components: an informational presentation followed by a panel discussion. The
37 presentation focused on highlighting the importance of supporting the Affordable Housing Trust, which is a
38 fund that seeks to increase access to affordable housing through the construction and preservation of
39 affordable housing units. We also emphasized the negative impact housing insecurity has on individual and
40 community healthcare outcomes. The panel discussion consisted of Coalition leaders who were able to
41 answer questions from the audience. A short survey was provided before and after the presentation, and the

- 1 results showed the attendees' knowledge and awareness of the role homelessness plays in healthcare
- 2 outcomes increased post-presentation.
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1 **DISCUSSION.**

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My experience with the Cincinnati Homeless Coalition is just one example of the small steps that medical students can take to become involved with their community. While focusing on academics in preclinical years is important, this experience allowed me to understand *why* I'm dedicating my time to these studies: to apply what I have learned to benefit those in need in my community.

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There were many takeaways from our project that could be implemented in different ways in the future. The clearest conclusion was that we realized most of the healthcare community is not aware of the connection between social determinants and negative health impacts. In addition, outside of the healthcare community, there are policies in place that directly affect the care we can provide to patients. The Affordable Housing Trust fund is a clear example of how physicians must be aware of political issues that are relevant to the healthcare needs of their community.

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Additionally, medical students should be encouraged to participate in service projects in their locality, to gain firsthand experience with the social determinants of health. Our project was shared with our classmates at the annual Learning Community Poster Symposium where we were able to learn about the diverse projects our peers were involved in, covering a wide range of these determinants.

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Many studies show that encouraging relationships between medical students and community partners can result in positive changes in the health outcomes of a community². In addition, community partnerships with medical schools have been shown to influence both the medical specialty students pursue and the location they choose to establish a practice³. In a study done understanding medical student experiences with community partners, researchers found that long term relationships with partners resulted in understanding community issues and developing key communication and interpersonal skills with individuals from these communities.⁴ Even simple mentoring relationships from individuals from under-resourced communities has shown development in medical students outside of the classroom and allows them to envision themselves as physicians serving these communities.⁵

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Understanding social determinants of health is the first step for medical students to shape their careers as physicians to benefit their community. Individually with patients, physicians need to spend time to understand the many factors that can affect their care such as reliable transportation, safe home environments, access to quality food and like the focus of our project, access to secure housing. On a macro-level, physicians also need to advocate for their patients, working with community leaders to enact systemic policy changes that can mitigate the impact social determinants of health can have on equitable care.

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I now have a clear understanding that my role as a physician is not simply to treat my patient's symptoms, but also to identify external obstacles they may face and search for solutions to combat social determinants of health. While the project only focused on homelessness as a social determinant of health, I hope to build relationships with other partners, understanding the gaps in healthcare in my community and how I can

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1 implement solutions to provide equitable care to my patients. The experience has also shown me that while I
2 must spend time with my patients to determine their medical necessities, I need to take the extra step in
3 understanding the other factors that are impacting their life. What began as something that seemed like
4 another task to check off my list in a first-year course has become one of my most impactful experiences with
5 takeaways that I plan to carry with me throughout my medical career.

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1 **FIGURES AND TABLES.**

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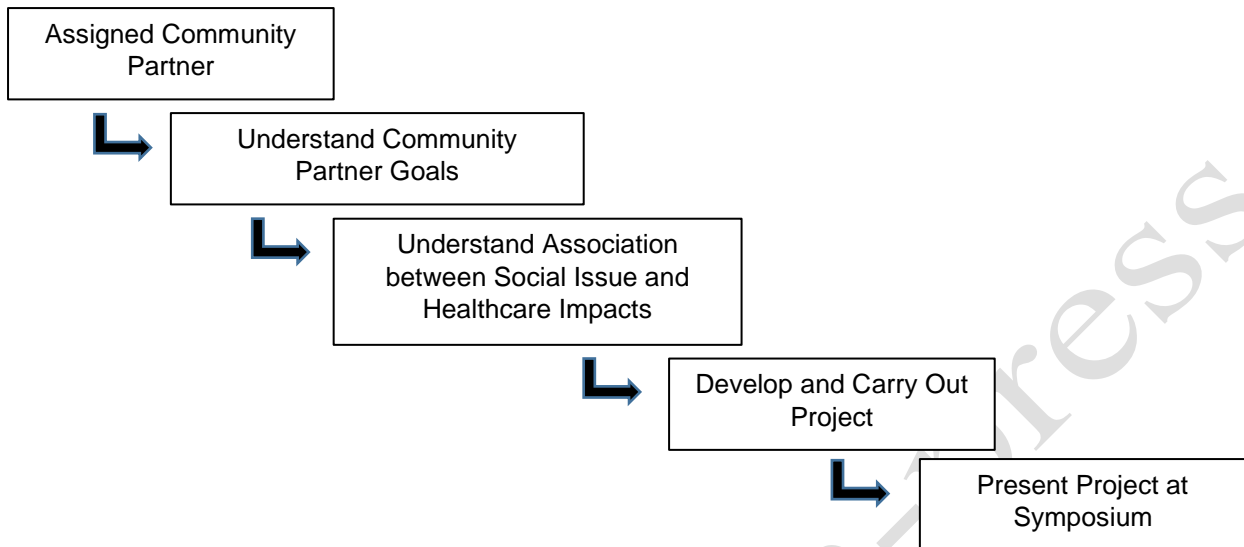
3 **Figure 1.** Flow chart depicting stages of project development, from conception to implementation.

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