

HOW HOUSING MATTERS

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Bringing Health Care Home for Low-Income Older Adults

A Profile of the Richmond Health and Wellness Program at Dominion Place in Richmond, Virginia

By Janet Viveiros



Type of Housing

Affordable multifamily rental homes for low-income older adults and individuals with disabilities

Funding Sources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Beacon Communities

Partners

- Virginia Commonwealth University
- Beacon Communities

Number of Residents Served

Open to 249 residents. Currently, 145 residents actively visit the clinic

Budget

\$1.5 million from 2013 to 2016 for clinic services

The Richmond Health and Wellness Program (RHWP) is a health clinic located at Dominion Place, a privately-owned apartment building with Project-Based Section 8 Rental Assistance for older adults and adults with disabilities, located near the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) campus in Richmond, Virginia. The RHWP clinic offers care coordination, blood pressure and glucose monitoring, and wellness education to augment residents' existing health care services and help them maintain their health between doctor visits. Interdisciplinary teams of students and faculty supervisors from the VCU Schools of Nursing, Medicine, Pharmacy, and Social Work staff the clinic during its weekly hours. Students gain experience working with health care providers from other disciplines to offer community care to older adults with chronic health conditions and limited health literacy.

Key Takeaways

Multi-family housing serving low-income older adults offers opportunities for supporting health and wellness. A university partnership on a weekly health clinic can strengthen older adults' health, prevent unnecessary high-cost service utilization, and provide students with practical community-based experience.

History

Dominion Place and VCU partnered to establish the RHWP clinic as a result of the combination of proximity, mutual needs and benefits, and the commitment of community-focused leaders. VCU's Richmond campus and Dominion Place are directly adjacent, creating a natural opportunity for university-community partnership. Pamela Parsons, PhD, GNP-BC, an associate professor at VCU and a geriatric nurse practitioner, recognized that locating a free health clinic at a senior apartment building had great potential to improve health care access for low-income older adults and provide valuable practical experience for VCU students.



A discussion between a Dominion Place resident and RWHP clinic staff member. Courtesy of the Richmond Health and Wellness program.

In addition to VCU proximity, Dominion Place was familiar to Dr. Parsons as a housing development with existing wellness programming for residents. The owner of Dominion Place, Beacon Communities, agreed that the clinic would enhance its wellness and recreational programming and offered free space to host it on site. Dominion Place resident services coordinator Greg Ford ensured that residents also had input into the clinic and its offerings before it opened.

RHWP received pilot funding from the VCU Council for Community Engagement in June 2012. A year later, the program received a three-year, \$1.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)ⁱ. The grant covers the costs of the medical supplies and equipment used in the clinic, as well as faculty time for clinic services and student supervision. Students receive academic credit for their clinic work.

Before the clinic opened, residents often used ambulances and emergency departments for routine care. In annual unit inspections, Dominion Place staff discovered that many residents were taking expired medications and using other residents' prescriptions, including medications not ordered by their care providers. Once the clinic opened, the student health care teams began meeting with residents to develop individual health plans, manage chronic conditions, assist with medications, and help residents comply with orders from their primary care providers. Most of the clinic's work involves care related to diabetes, high blood pressure, and medication management.

The residential setting and relatively consistent staff have allowed residents to develop trusting relationships at the clinic rather than being intimidated or confused as they might be in more traditional medical settings. Because of that trust, residents share health concerns that they had been reluctant to broach with their primary care providers. Residents are also increasingly requesting transitional care home visits by the RHWP team when they experience changes to their health status, or return from the emergency room, hospital or nursing home stay. As the clinic staff learned more about the residents' needs, it has added more services such as free medication delivery by a local pharmacy. Clinic staff is able to respond to more serious medical concerns and schedule same-day doctor appointments, transportation, and/or emergency room admission as needed.

Two years after the clinic first opened, Ford says many "residents take pride in helping to educate future health care providers" and "want to take better care of themselves to show their pride in the students and help the students see the benefit of their work." Dominion Place staff has noticed improvements among participating residents in proper medication storage and usage, along with reduced use of ambulances. Dr. Parsons plans to measure the program's outcomes by tracking ambulance usage, medication adherence, and coordination with other care providers, as well as overall health cost savings achieved by the clinic.

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Opportunities

Leveraging Local Institutions. RHWP benefits from the presence of VCU students and faculty of various disciplines in close proximity to Dominion Place. The mutually beneficial model offers health care providers service experience while providing residents in a low-income apartment building with increased health care access. But communities do not need to have a large public university with extensive health care programs to make something like RHWP work. Non-profit health care providers are required to demonstrate the community benefits of their services and may make equally willing partners.



Maximizing Partner Assets. The dedication and commitment of RWHP's partners also presented opportunities that have made the program possible. VCU and Dr. Parsons seeded RHWP with ideas, energy, and pilot funding. Those seeds found a receptive environment in Dominion Place and Beacon Communities. Beacon Communities provided free clinic space, which will soon be expanded, and assistance in connecting RHWP with potential future funders. The commitment of Dominion Place's resident services coordinator secured buy-in from residents. Dr. Parsons attributes residents' engagement with RHWP to Ford's understanding of resident culture and his desire to empower residents in healthy living.

A RWHP clinic staff member administers an eye exam for a Dominion Place resident. Courtesy of the Richmond Health and Wellness program.

Challenges

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Structuring the Partnership. Aligning the requirements and procedures of a large public university and a private affordable housing provider presented some initial challenges for RHWP. To formalize the partnerships, VCU administrators and Beacon Communities needed to resolve questions of legal liability and academic program requirements. After extensive communication, some procedures were streamlined, some compromises were reached, and the clinic was able to get started.

Sustaining the Program. The greatest current concern for the program and its partner Beacon Communities, however, is sustainability. They are currently working to secure long-term funding for 2016 when RHWP's current grant ends. Dr. Parsons is optimistic that the results of the program evaluation will demonstrate the value of the clinic to the residents at Dominion Place and show its potential to improve the health and quality of life for other low-income older adults. According to Dr. Parsons, "Beacon Communities has been a real advocate for us" by helping to search for funding opportunities and supporting the clinic's daily activities.



A Dominion Place resident undergoing an examination in the RWHP clinic. Courtesy of the Richmond Health and Wellness program.

While these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. Using a portion of its current HRSA grant, RHWP plans to open two more clinics in low-income senior housing in Richmond over the next two years and, in the fall, add a weekly mental health clinic day at Dominion Place.

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This case study was prepared by the Center for Housing Policy, the research division of the National Housing Conference (NHC) that specializes in developing solutions through research. Through evidence-based advocacy for the continuum of housing, NHC develops ideas, resources, and policy solutions to shape an improved housing landscape. For more information, see www.nhc.org.



COVER IMAGE: A Dominion Place resident sitting with RWHP clinic staff. Courtesy of the Richmond Health and Wellness program.