

Sierra Health Foundation

Helping Homeless & Foster Youth Manage and Protect Life Documents

SACRAMENTO



HOMELESS AND FOSTER CARE YOUTH ARE AT A HIGHER RISK than other young people for a variety of health problems, including mental health issues and sexual health complications. They often receive inconsistent medical care and have problems navigating the health care system. One of the biggest challenges is that these youth don't have a central place to keep and access their medical records.

However, access to medical records is just one part of the problem. These young people also have trouble navigating other important systems to obtain education, employment and housing because they don't have access to key documentation such as their Social Security card, birth certificate and school records.

For example, without immunization records and documentation to prove residency, a homeless child may have difficulty enrolling in school. Without complete medical records, a foster child is at risk for receiving inconsistent medical care such as repeated immunizations, allergic reactions to medication and unnecessary medical tests. Without a birth certificate or Social Security card, these young people have a hard time applying for jobs or social services.

In 2008, Sierra Health Foundation, a private foundation that promotes health and quality of life for people in Northern California, was starting to explore ways to give youth in the region access to all of this important documentation.

Sierra Health was approached by FollowMe, a company that provides technology for storing personal health records online, and the UC Davis School of Medicine about a potential solution. A few years earlier, FollowMe created a successful program that allowed migrant farm workers in Northern California to store their personal health care records online. They were interested in launching a pilot project that would test this online model for young people.

Sierra Health gave a small grant to Wind Youth Services, a homeless youth center and shelter in Sacramento, to see if their young clients would be interested in this type of online resource. When the youth showed strong interest in the idea, the foundation supported the collaborative effort of FollowMe, Wind Youth Services and UC Davis, along with Linkage to Education, California State University Sacramento Public Health Nursing, and Community Health Resource and Development Center, to create Healthshack. More recently, United HealthCare joined as a significant funding partner to finalize the development of the technology.

“These kids face so many challenges in life. Healthshack gives them a place to store important documents, but it also gives them a place to go for information and resources to help them take control of their health.”

—KIM WHITNEY,
RN, BSN

Healthshack is an online service that provides homeless and foster care youth with a safe location to store important health information and other life documents. The information is confidential and each member must grant permission for medical providers, caseworkers, caregivers and others to view selected information. For example, a member could let a school review his vaccination records while another member could give permission for an employer to see her Social Security card. Each member also receives a personal identification card that lists emergency contacts, medical conditions and other information about specific medication needs and allergies.

Each young person who joins Healthshack meets with a volunteer public health nurse who helps enter information into the system. These nurses are a valuable resource for the member, tracking down records, filling out updates and reports and providing information about future health-care options for the young person.

Health Shack was launched in January 2010 in the Sacramento area and now has more than 180 members.

One of the reasons Healthshack has been successful is that from the beginning Sierra Health Foundation knew it would be important to get input from young people. The grant included support to create a group of Youth Health Ambassadors from Wind who worked alongside FollowMe to make sure the Web site would be relevant and useful to their peers. As a result, Healthshack is much more than a storage facility for documents. It has links to social networking Web sites where young people can invite others to join the service, links to youth-created videos explaining health concepts and how to use the service to manage documents, and links to resources and other services.



An unexpected benefit of the project is that this group of Youth Health Ambassadors has built a unique skill set by providing ongoing counsel and technical assistance to the project. They were recently asked to speak at the national Health IT Resource Tech-In and are providing consultation to other public health groups. The foundation is exploring ways to continue to support these young people in this role.

The Healthshack pilot project has been such a success in Sacramento that Sierra Health Foundation and its partners are working to make the technology available to homeless and foster youth in all of Northern California and hope that the program will be replicated in other parts of the country.

SIERRA HEALTH FOUNDATION: *Sierra Health Foundation is a private philanthropy with a mission to invest in and serve as a catalyst for ideas, partnerships and programs that improve health and quality of life in Northern California. Sierra Health is committed to improving health outcomes and reducing health disparities in the region through convening, educating and strategic grantmaking. The funding region includes 26 counties in the northeast part of the state.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION,
PLEASE VISIT:

Sierra Health Foundation
www.sierrahealth.org

Health Shack
www.healthshack.info

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