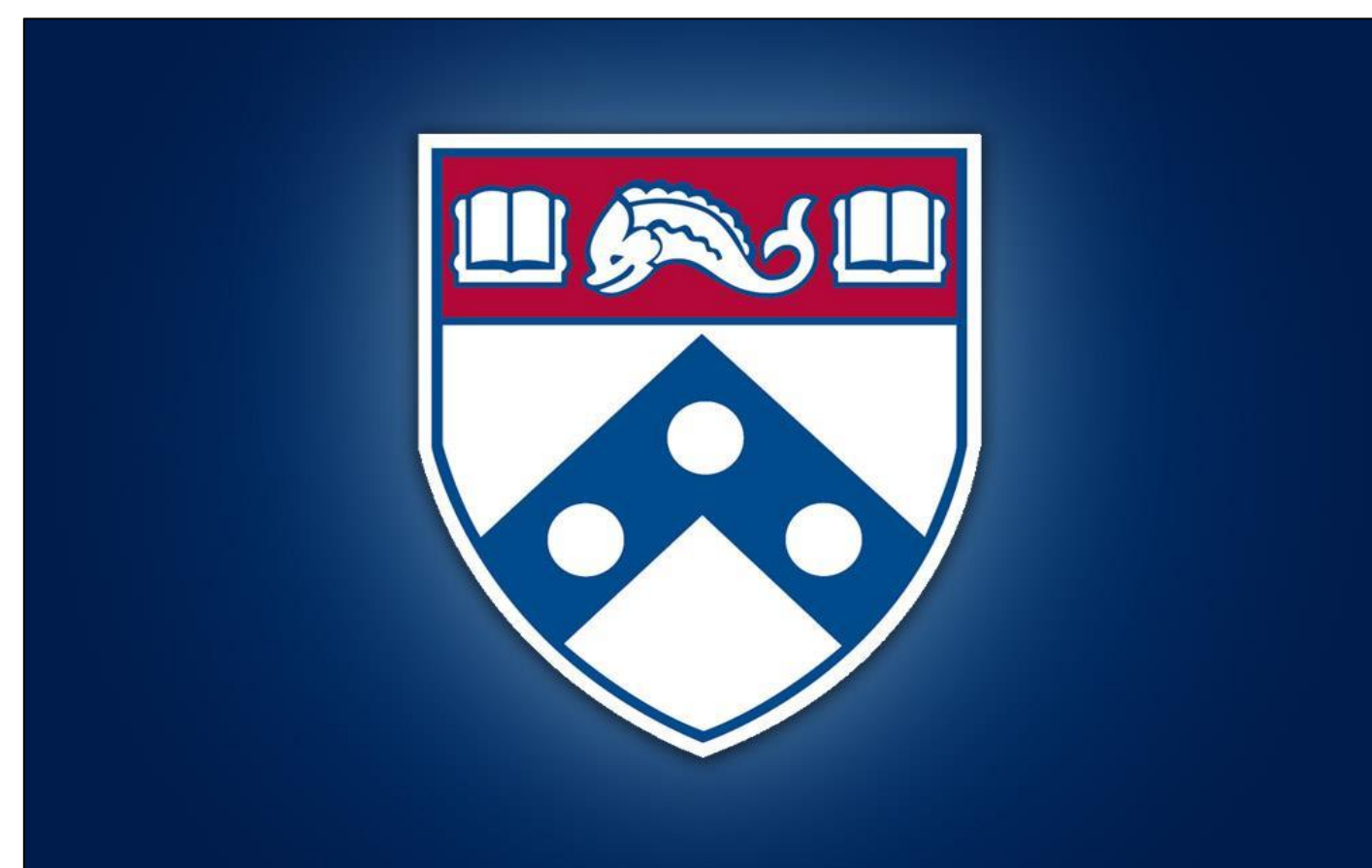


Bridging the Gaps



Reaching Teens: Adolescent Health and Life in a Shelter Context

Student Interns: Ashlan Willett, MS, University of Pennsylvania, Perelman School of Medicine
Academic Preceptors: Hillary Bogner, MD, MSCE, University of Pennsylvania;
Christopher Renjilian, MD, MBE, University of Pennsylvania
Community Preceptors: David Maddox, MSW, Covenant House Pennsylvania

COMMUNITY PARTNER

Covenant House Pennsylvania is an emergency shelter crisis center open 24/7 in the Philadelphia suburb of Germantown that serves adolescents who are 18-21 years old. It provides them with free housing, food, clothing, career and vocational training, enrichment activities, mental healthcare, and medical care at the CHOP Connections Clinic. Youth come in often with experiences of the foster care system, housing instability, human trafficking, and incarceration. The organization seeks to meet youth where they are at, providing them immediately with services, a sanctuary from the street, structured days, and life-enhancing values grounded in trust, honest, respect, and love. The work for staff at Covenant House is to recognize and acknowledge the strengths these youth already possess. This crucial step moves beyond assumptions about youth based on their behavior to see them as they deserve to be seen, an approach that empowers the youth to seek success in the face of challenges. <https://www.covenanthousepa.org>

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

There are many other shelters in Pennsylvania that serve adults and pregnant individuals. Yet, Covenant House Pennsylvania is the only shelter in the state that exclusively serves 18 to 21-year-old adolescents in need of housing. Such adolescents, many of whom are LGBTQ+ and/or people of color, come to this crisis center in a city that has the largest poverty rate of big cities. While providing medical care is crucial for these youth, especially those who are under- or un-insured, a clinical intake is often required for youth to advance forward to get more stable housing.

TEAM'S EXPERIENCE

The Covenant House Pennsylvania student intern engaged in both clinical coordination and community engagement. In the clinic, they prepared daily clinic schedules, completed intake and follow-up visits under the preceptorship of adolescent medicine physicians, shadowed the psychiatrist on staff, connected youth with lab testing and outside clinical care, and ensured the general medical needs of residents were met. Outside the clinic, they liaised with staff members around health needs and attended enrichment activities. Further, a conversation with a non-binary youth advisor allowed them to provide the community preceptor with a description of how gender diversity was experienced at the shelter.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS/ CHALLENGES/ JOYS

- Began learning a strength-based, trauma-sensitive, resilience-aware model from expert clinicians
- Led a relaxation and calming tools workshop for youth
- Weekly conversations with my community preceptor allowed me to more deeply understand the daily issues facing staff and youth
- It was difficult juggling a clinical role and its emotional challenges while also trying to find time to engage fully with the community and get to know the youth in non-clinical spaces
- Deeply moved by the strengths of the youth—such as their emotional intelligent, their sheer brilliance, their dedication to growth

REFLECTION

This summer, I have begun learning a skillset and philosophy at Covenant House Pennsylvania that I believe applies both within and beyond the clinic. This strength-based skillset will allow me to better carry my present self throughout my life, to more deeply attend to all aspects of social encounters, and to recognize my limits as a human being exposed to others' suffering. I have seen how thoughtful use of this skillset can create space for youth to discuss urgent yet sensitive health issues, and I have learned to better cope with the emotional consequences from this important work. The experience motivates me to engage more deeply with community health and to hone skillsets that will allow me to not only unpack human experience more deeply, but to structure my career around the gray areas of human experience.