

Health and Healing in a Foot Clinic: Gender-based Violence and Medical Mistrust among Unhoused Women in Boston

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Abstract

The Foot Clinic at Women's Lunch Place Day Shelter aims to treat patients' foot conditions while building trust between unhoused women and healthcare professionals. Over the last month, we have examined the number of patients who visit our clinic, the duration of their stay in the clinic, any referrals we make to other healthcare professionals, and any patient feedback. Since September, we have treated 42 individuals (for an average of 28 minutes each), 23 cases of athlete's foot, referred five women to primary care, had seven repeat patients, and helped one woman set up health insurance. As our research is in an exploratory phase, more data is needed before conclusions can be drawn. However, our qualitative and quantitative data thus far suggests the foot clinic has helped bridge the divide between healthcare professionals and unhoused women in Boston.

Background Information

Unhoused People in Boston

The 2024 Annual Homelessness Census in Boston recorded 5,756 unhoused individuals, up 10% from 2022. Unhoused individuals are uniquely exposed to conditions that lead to significantly worse health outcomes, compared to their sheltered peers.

Founded in 1985 by Dr. Jim O'Connell, Boston Healthcare for the Homeless Program (BHCHP) tirelessly strives to provide unhoused individuals with the highest quality of medical care. BHCHP now insures over 35% of individuals experiencing homelessness in the greater Boston area. They have locations at several homeless shelters and resource centers. BHCHP operates several walk-in clinics, a mobile unit, respite houses, and foot clinics, including one at St. Francis house.

St. Francis House Day Shelter

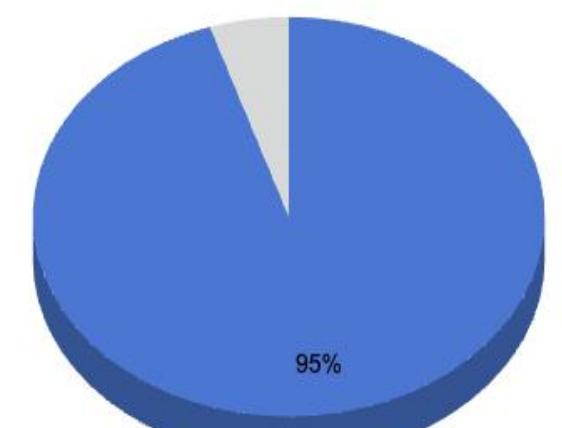
BHCHP's fully functioning clinic at St. Francis House is equipped with multiple nurses, internal medicine practitioners, and a harm reduction center. At their foot clinic, patients soak their feet, have their vital signs checked, and speak with a nurse or pre-health student for about 15 minutes. This environment allows each patient to build a personal relationship with the healthcare professionals on staff. Additionally, it serves as a screening procedure for larger and life-threatening health conditions. However, St. Francis House is a predominantly male environment. Many unhoused women in the Boston area report feeling uncomfortable at St. Francis House due to fears of being sexually assaulted or encountering their perpetrator at the shelter. This unwelcoming setting leads to gender inequity among unhoused individuals; unhoused men are more likely to have healthcare compared to unhoused women.

Women's Lunch Place

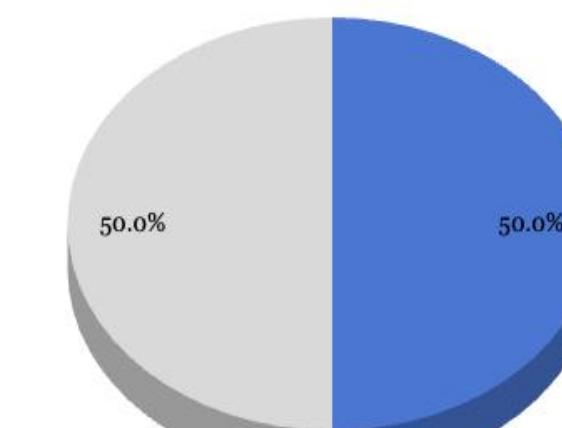
Women's Lunch Place (WLP) is a large day shelter in Downtown Boston that serves female and genderqueer populations. WLP provides healthcare through BHCHP, which has stationed one full-time nurse at the location. This nurse reports that about half the women at WLP "are regulars" in her clinic. They routinely feel comfortable speaking to her about their healthcare concerns. She can refer them to specialists as needed. However, she reports the other half are difficult to reach. They generally do not feel comfortable with healthcare professionals or in healthcare settings. There is also a language barrier, as many women at WLP speak either Mandarin or Spanish, and the nurse does not speak those languages.

Additionally, compared to the St. Francis House Day Shelter, the clinical space at WLP is less accessible and has considerably less resources. St. Francis House is equipped with a team of doctors and nurses instead of a single healthcare professional. As a result, staff members at WLP report that only about 50% of guests have health insurance. At St. Francis House, staff members report that 95% of guests have health insurance.

Share of (Predominantly Male) Patients at St. Francis Foot Clinic with Health Insurance



Share of Women at WLP with Health Insurance



The Foot Clinic at Women's Lunch Place

Bridging the Gap

We have founded the Foot Clinic at Women's Lunch Place, which is modeled after the foot clinic at St. Francis House. It is our goal to bring the same quality of care and ease of accessibility to women and genderqueer populations experiencing housing insecurity. We believe the foot clinic will allow us to build the "community of friends" that Dr. Jim O'Connell speaks about. At the foot clinic, our patients have the opportunity to build a stable, trusting relationship with their healthcare providers, laying the foundation for more urgent and essential medical care. The center is a collaboration between undergraduate pre-health volunteers, Boston Healthcare for the Homeless, and the staff already working at WLP.

Program Description

Unhoused people experience a variety of foot-related health issues, brought about by the uniquely challenging living conditions they experience. The Foot Clinic at Women's Lunch Place serves to treat these complications with adaptability, love, and compassion. The mission of the Foot Clinic at WLP is three-fold:

1

Treat each patient's foot conditions appropriately with the intention of relieving pain, maintaining hygiene, and improving quality of life.

2

Help to heal trauma and build trust in a clinical setting among individuals who have been systematically underserved and neglected by the medical community.

3

Educate pre-health students about the unique medical needs that unhoused populations have, so that future healthcare professionals will build healthcare systems with equity for all in mind.

Mission Statement

At the Foot Clinic, our mission is to build a bridge of trust and compassion between medical professionals and the unhoused community within an all-female setting. We are dedicated to providing exceptional foot care services, offering vital referrals to specialized doctors, and fostering a healing environment that addresses both physical and emotional traumas. Our clinic is a sanctuary where every step taken is towards recovery, dignity, and holistic well-being, ensuring that every woman feels valued, heard, and empowered on her journey to health.

Our Model

BC Students: Responsible for funding the clinic

Boston College: Provides Student Volunteers

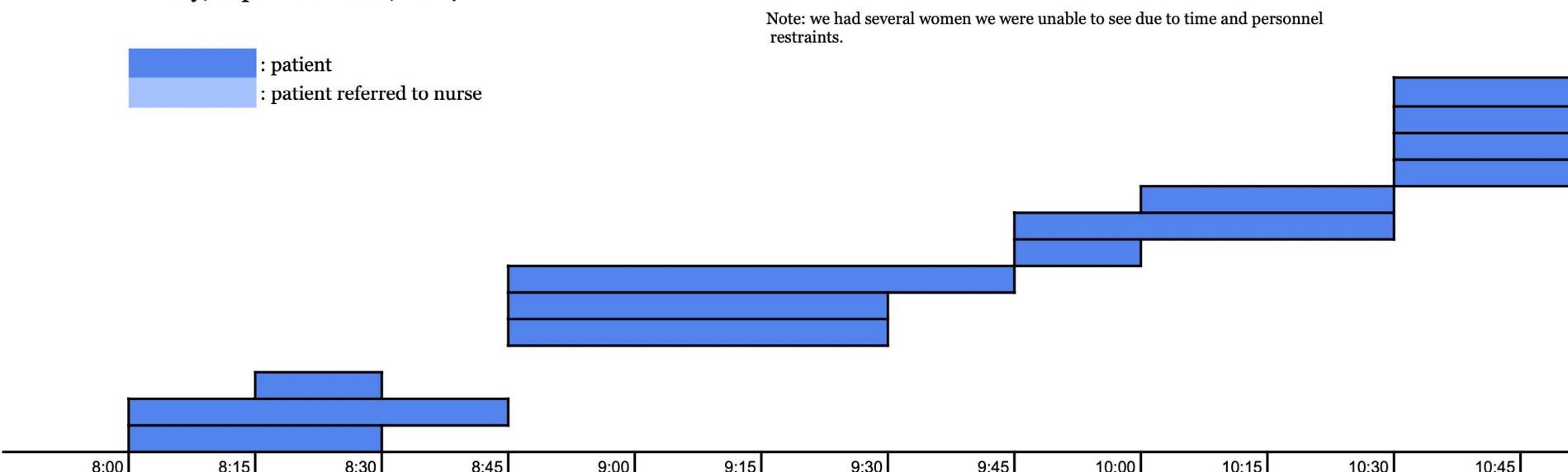
BHCHP: Provides healthcare services via the on-site nurse

Women's Lunch Place: Provides location and facilitates connections with guests

Purpose: Healthcare Equity among Unhoused Populations, Regardless of Gender Identity

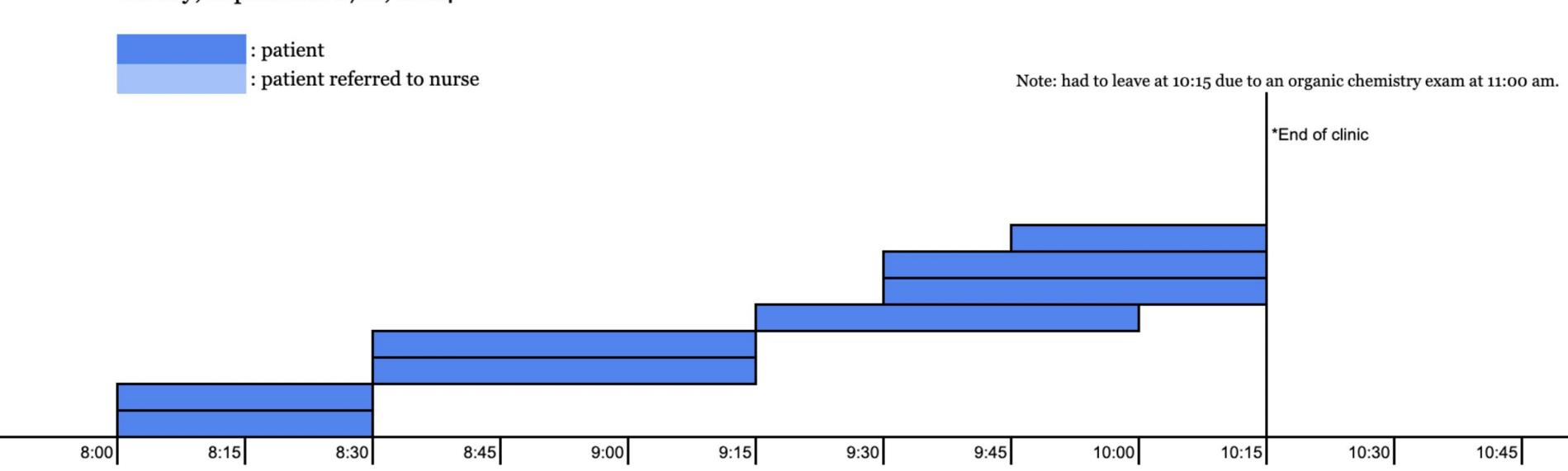
Clinic Results: Duration and Timing

Friday, September 20th, 2024



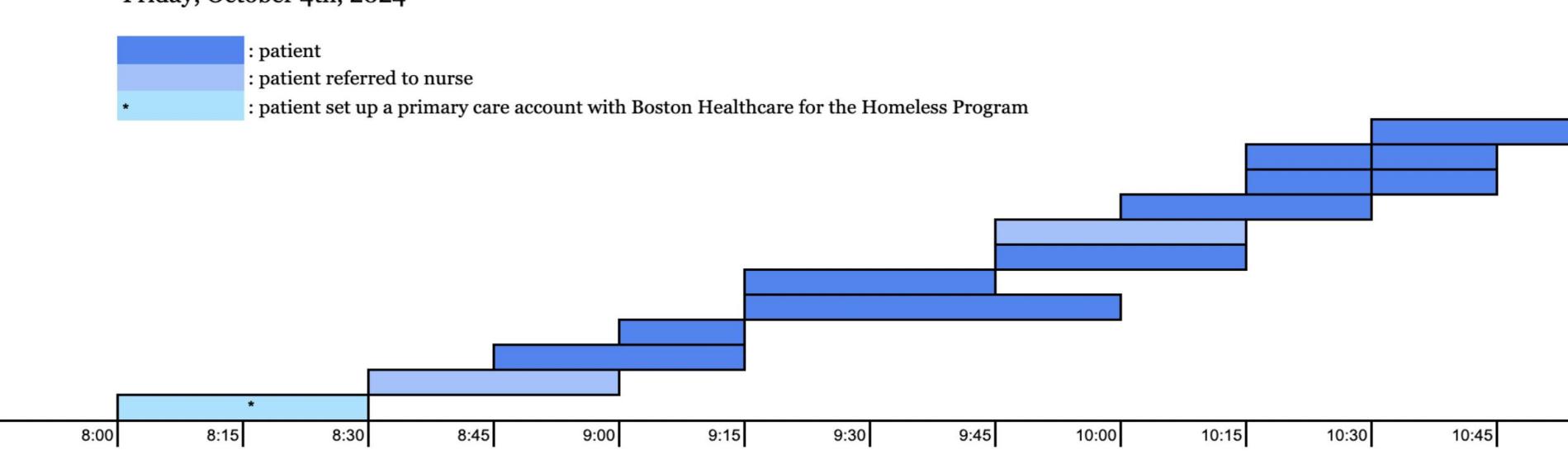
- We saw 15 patients on our first day for a total of 461 minutes. Several of the patients reported not feeling safe at the St. Francis House foot clinic.
- Seven women were waiting to attend the clinic, but we had to close before we could accommodate them.

Friday, September 27th, 2024



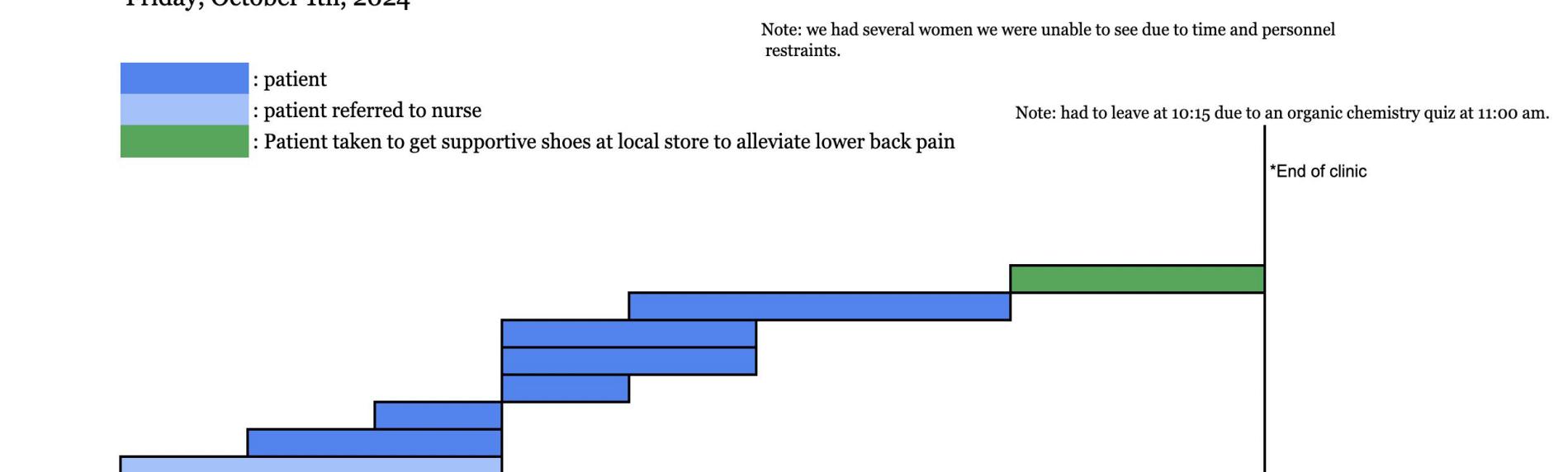
- We saw 8 patients for a total of 243 minutes.
- We introduced two women to the nurse on staff at WLP after they came to the clinic.

Friday, October 4th, 2024



- We saw 12 patients for a total of 287 minutes.
- The nurse treated one bunion and one severely bruised toe within our clinical space.
- We set one woman up with a primary care account at BHCHP.

Friday, October 11th, 2024



- We saw seven patients for 202 minutes.
- We were able to engage three patients who did not speak English. We saw four repeat patients.
- Other patients expressed interest but did not yet feel comfortable because they were embarrassed about the condition of their feet.

Community Impact

"This is the first time I've soaked my feet in months."
 "I don't feel comfortable at St. Francis House because it's not as welcoming of an environment."
 "I've been sleeping outside so it's hard to keep my feet clean."
 "I've only been in Boston for two weeks and I'm staying at Pine Street Inn. Before Boston, I was in Atlanta. I couldn't get free health insurance there. I'd love to be set up with an account."



"The last time I was at the St. Francis House foot clinic, I couldn't really scrub my feet. Both my hands were broken so I couldn't hold the nail clippers or brush. I'm glad I could come here."

[When speaking to another guest] "You should treat yourself and go to the Foot Clinic."

"I have pain in my feet that has been bothering me for weeks. I would love to speak with a nurse."

"It's nice to feel human."

"You should make an announcement to everyone. They need to know about the clinic."



"There aren't a lot of women over at St. Francis House. Maybe only 20% are women. We would rather be here."

Long Term Vision

We envision bringing together unhoused individuals and healthcare professionals across the country, from Boston to Los Angeles. We would like to establish a national standard of care, while simultaneously adapting to the unique needs of each community that we collaborate with through encouraging pre-med students to establish relationship-based and trauma-informed healthcare at the local level. Along these lines, we aim to expand beyond the Boston area within the next year. We are in conversation with Baylor University in Texas as their students are interested in following our model. We also anticipate starting a similar foot clinic in Denver. We are looking for shelters and universities interested in collaboration. Please reach out if your team would be a good fit for our project.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the unwavering support of the following people and organizations:

- The wonderful guests at Women's Lunch Place and St. Francis House, whose openness to sharing their stories with complete strangers has inspired this entire project.
- Women's Lunch Place, in wholeheartedly supporting our vision and supplying us with access to a space where women feel safe and comfortable.
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Sources

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