

HEALING, HOPE AND HUMANITY

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Rivier advances health services in the community



Some lessons can't be learned in a classroom or simulation lab. Some experiences, offered in the most unlikely places ... a soup kitchen, a recreation hall, even a prison, can have the greatest educational and professional impact.

At the end of their undergraduate course of study, nursing students are enrolled in a Community Health class that provides them the opportunity to meet their future patients, interact with them on a one-to-one basis, and hone their people skills as well as their practical skills. These experiences help nursing students to develop abilities crucial to their professional success—communication, caring, empathy, and trust.

ON A MISSION

The Community Health class embodies the University's mission. "Rivier's mission is transforming hearts and minds to serve the world, but if you dig a little deeper into the mission, it really talks about caring for every human being with respect and dignity," shares [Dr. Judi O'Hara, Rivier's Director of Undergraduate Nursing Programs](#). "When we go out into the community, we are caring for every person within our community, all individuals with no judgment passed."

Students enrolled in the class have served the homeless, people with substance use disorders, the homebound, and the imprisoned through Rivier's partnerships with area organizations. Partners include The Day Café, an organization supporting the homeless; Revive, a recovery organization; the Nashua Soup Kitchen and Shelter; the Nashua and Lawrence, Massachusetts, Public Health Departments; Concord Men's Prison; Visiting Nurse Associations and hospice houses.

"The Community Health class plays a very important role in the education of our nursing students," says Dr. O'Hara. "We take learning beyond the classroom to help prevent disease and promote health and healthy behaviors. Our nursing program maintains a high profile throughout the community."

Serving a range of populations in several different settings, nursing students perform cholesterol and glucose screenings, blood pressure checks, vaccine clinics, foot care programs, harm reduction visits, ambulatory care, symptom control and support. These experiences engage students with patients from various economic, cultural, social, and religious backgrounds and provide insight into the impact of these factors on their health and wellness.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

[Alumna Kera Kelly, RN](#) has returned to Rivier as a nursing instructor following her graduation in 2020. Inspired by her own Community Health class experiences, she now teaches the course and manages Rivier's footcare program at The Day Café in Nashua. The Café was named after Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and its principle of hospitality to those marginalized by society. In addition to washing visitors' feet, checking circulation, and treating wounds, student-nurses provide new, clean, dry socks as part of their care.

The Day Café opens weekday mornings in St. Patrick Church's parish hall on Main Street. It is a safe space where Nashua's homeless population gathers for coffee, snacks, and socialization. "We open the door and welcome everybody. No judgment. Everybody is treated with dignity and respect," says [Deborah Andrews, The Day Café's co-founder and lead volunteer](#). "They come through the door, sit down, play cards, and talk to friends. If we see somebody struggling, if they're interested, we can point them in the right direction."

The 'right direction' refers to the 11 local organizations, including Rivier University, that offer services at the Café weekly, and another 21 partner organizations that deliver care on an as-needed basis. This collaboration of community health resources has transformed the Café from a coffee stop to a hub of life-giving support for those in need.

The experience for Rivier nursing students is profound. In assessing the lessons learned, Kera shares that they come to appreciate the "dignity of the human person; providing respect and compassionate healthcare ... because at the end of the day, everybody should be receiving the same healthcare. The goal is that they are immersed in this experience, in a different setting than they've ever been in before, and are providing dignified, compassionate care."

OUTREACH FOR NATIONAL SUPPORT

On behalf of her Community Health students and the University, Kera reached out to Bombas sock company, an organization whose mission is “to provide comfort for all.” She explained the collaboration's mission in her donation request letter to Bombas, “For a person experiencing homelessness, their feet are often their primary mode of transportation. They are so important but often forgotten and neglected as survival is more important than the holes in their shoes and blisters on their feet.”



Kera Kelly, RN '20 (left) and Community Health class nurses display Bombas socks donated to Rivier's footcare program at The Day Café.

Recognizing the need and value of the initiative, Bombas responded with a donation of 500 pairs of premium socks earlier this year. Going further, Kera recently reached out to New Balance footwear company requesting a donation of sneakers with winter approaching.

HEALING AND HOPE

Community health resources are important to public health. Delivering care to individuals and populations that might otherwise receive none improves communities' overall health and diminishes human suffering, physically and emotionally.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), most community health workers reside in the areas they service and serve residents where they live, eat, play, work, and worship. The NIH recognizes community health workers as “frontline agents of change, helping to reduce health disparities in underserved communities.” The outreach conducted by Rivier's faculty and student-nurses supports greater access to health screenings and services, improved communication between community members and healthcare providers, and reduced need for emergency care.

For the homeless and other marginalized populations, the recognition and compassion offered by Rivier's student-nurses is as appreciated as the physical care provided. Their acknowledgement of each person as worthy and valued offers healing and hope in each community served. ■