

# AHEC Builds Opportunity for Young Social Workers

Virna Little, PsyD, LCSW-R, SAP

*Social work internships at an inner-city Community Health Center provide sought-after and valuable training for students.*

Every year, 30-40 students find placements at the Institute for Urban Family Health in New York City to train as social workers. The opportunity to intern at the Institute and its community health centers has become one of the most requested placements at many of the local universities. Fordham University, Columbia University, New York University, Yeshiva University, Lehman College, and Adelphi University send undergraduate and graduate students to the Institute for on-site, hands-on learning. What makes this AHEC-sponsored program so popular?

“Most students think of doing their internships at social service agencies or hospitals. They have never considered an internship at a community health center,” says Maxine Golub, MPH, regional director of the New York Metropolitan Regional AHEC (NYMRAHEC). “They are often surprised to learn about the varied opportunities the AHEC social work internships offer. Students work at health centers, free clinics, school-based health centers, and sites that provide health care for people who are homeless. It’s a great opportunity for all the students.”

Many people do not realize the amount of training, especially field training, that is required to be a professional social worker. Requirements for an MSW include three internships, with an average of two to three full days in the field for two semesters. The Institute offers opportunities for social work students in the areas of general

practice, research, clinical work, and administration.

The Institute’s social work internships, coordinated by the New York Metropolitan AHEC, place undergraduate and graduate students at community health centers, many of which are located in traditionally underserved neighborhoods in the Bronx and Manhattan. The students are given a variety of assignments, including direct care with patients, outreach to community agencies, or conducting research projects. Interns are a vital and valued part of the psychosocial services department and the centers.

Community Health Centers (CHCs) offer a rich learning opportunity that expands beyond general social services into public health and mental health. The client base is diverse – in age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and need. Clients come with multiple presenting issues. They may need crisis intervention because they have no food or shelter or because they are living with family violence. They may need concrete services such as food stamps or insurance. They may need clinical services such as therapy for relationship problems, depression, or anxiety. The CHC’s diverse client base provides an excellent forum for first-year students to build a foundation and learn about different services and populations. The kind of diversity seen at community health centers is rare in most

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intern placements for social work students. Many second-year social work students have the opportunity to provide therapy to adults and children or run anger management or depression groups. In addition to direct patient care, students participate in special learning activities such as in-service training programs for Community Health Center employees and lectures by Institute staff members.

At participating CHCs, the social workers and social work students play a critical role on interdisciplinary teams. Social workers collaborate with primary care providers in treating patients and make a tremendous contribution to patient care. Patients form relationships with social workers that help to increase their understanding of medical conditions and improve their adherence to recommended medical treatment.

Our program has been successful in its goal of retaining young social work graduates to work in

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underserved neighborhoods. We have offered several of our interns positions after graduation, and some have been promoted. “I am grateful for my experience as an intern with the Institute. Many of my peers in school did not get the range of experiences nor have such dedicated supervisors as I was fortunate to have,” says Linda Tillmon, LMSW, now the Institute’s regional director of psychosocial services in the Bronx.

We take pride in our internship program and work hard to make sure it is a valuable experience for all our students. Additionally, we are helping to make sure that all social workers who enter the profession are qualified, competent, well-trained professionals.

Not only do students receive an excellent internship, but the clients benefit from the services as well. This internship certainly is an example of a strong and lasting relationship between AHEC and a community health center.