


STREET NURSING INSTITUTE

# DEVELOPING A STREET NURSING OUTREACH PROGRAM

## A Practical Guide for Healthcare Professionals, Community Organizations, and Academic Institutions

## INTRODUCTION

Street nursing is a community-based approach to healthcare delivery that brings nursing services directly to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness and other populations facing significant barriers to accessing traditional healthcare settings.

Street nursing recognizes that individuals living on the streets frequently experience complex and interconnected health challenges, including chronic illness, untreated wounds, infectious diseases, mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and limited access to preventive and ongoing healthcare services.

Establishing a street nursing outreach program requires thoughtful planning, community engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a commitment to safe, ethical, evidence-based nursing practice.

This guide provides a practical framework for developing, implementing, and sustaining a street nursing outreach program. It also addresses considerations for student-driven programs affiliated with healthcare academic institutions.

The recommendations are adapted from the Street Medicine Institute Student Coalition's program development framework, with an emphasis on nursing practice, professional accountability, patient safety, and community-based care.

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## 1. ASSESS THE COMMUNITY SETTING

Before establishing a street nursing program, develop an understanding of the population experiencing homelessness and the services already available within the community.

**Recommended Actions**

- Review local Point-in-Time Count reports and other available data describing the population experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness.
- Identify geographic areas where individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness commonly reside or congregate.
- Research existing healthcare, behavioral health, housing, social service, and outreach organizations.
- Identify gaps in healthcare access, continuity of care, and essential services.
- Determine whether established street medicine, mobile healthcare, or community outreach programs already operate in the area.
- Explore opportunities to collaborate with existing organizations rather than duplicate services.
- Review local policies and initiatives addressing homelessness.

**Key Consideration:** Effective street nursing programs should complement existing community services and respond to identified healthcare needs rather than operate independently of established support systems.

## 2. IDENTIFY PROGRAM LEADERSHIP AND CLINICAL SUPPORT

Successful street nursing programs require qualified leadership, clearly defined responsibilities, and appropriate clinical oversight.

**Recommended Actions**

- Identify a licensed nurse with relevant clinical experience to provide nursing leadership.
- Establish a leadership structure responsible for program coordination, clinical practice, volunteer management, and operational decisions.
- Identify healthcare professionals authorized to provide additional clinical services, consultation, or prescribing support when needed.
- Establish relationships with community organizations experienced in working with individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Identify individuals with lived experience who can provide valuable perspectives regarding community needs, barriers to care, and effective engagement strategies.
- Determine the organizational structure under which the program will operate.

**Professional Accountability**

All nursing services must be consistent with applicable nursing laws, professional standards, individual licensure, organizational policies, and authorized clinical protocols.

Registered nurses, advanced practice registered nurses, and other healthcare professionals must practice within their respective scopes of practice.

## 3. CONDUCT A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A needs assessment helps determine which services will be most beneficial and feasible for the population served.

**Recommended Actions**

- Review existing community assessments before collecting additional information.
- Consult established outreach organizations and healthcare providers regarding commonly encountered health conditions and service gaps.
- Seek input directly from individuals experiencing homelessness when appropriate, using respectful and trauma-informed approaches.
- Identify common healthcare needs, including wound care, chronic disease management, medication access, infection prevention, behavioral health support, and overdose prevention.
- Evaluate barriers to accessing healthcare, including transportation, identification requirements, financial limitations, and fragmented services.
- Identify opportunities for referral and follow-up care.

**Key Consideration:** Community members should be recognized as experts in their own experiences. Their perspectives should guide program priorities and service delivery.

## 4. ESTABLISH COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Street nursing programs are strengthened through collaborative relationships with organizations already serving individuals experiencing homelessness.

**Potential Community Partners**

- Street medicine and mobile healthcare programs
- Federally Qualified Health Centers and community clinics
- Homeless outreach organizations and shelters
- Behavioral health and substance use treatment providers
- Harm reduction and recovery support organizations
- Housing and case management agencies
- Public health departments
- Food assistance and essential resource providers
- Academic healthcare institutions

**Recommended Actions**

- Establish clear communication channels with participating organizations.
- Define the responsibilities and limitations of each partner.
- Develop referral pathways for healthcare and social services.
- Coordinate outreach activities to reduce duplication and improve continuity.
- Consider written agreements when responsibilities, resources, or information-sharing arrangements require formal clarification.

**Key Consideration:** Collaboration should strengthen existing community efforts while preserving the autonomy and dignity of individuals receiving services.

## 5. DEFINE THE PROGRAM'S MISSION, GOALS, AND SCOPE OF SERVICES

A clearly defined mission and operational framework provide direction and support consistent program implementation.

**Recommended Actions**

- Develop a mission statement reflecting the program's commitment to equitable, compassionate, and evidence-based nursing care.
- Identify the target population and geographic service area.
- Establish realistic short-term and long-term program goals.
- Define the nursing services that can be safely delivered in field conditions.
- Establish eligibility criteria, if applicable, and processes for connecting individuals to services.
- Determine outreach frequency, locations, staffing requirements, and operating procedures.
- Begin with a manageable range of services and expand based on demonstrated needs, available resources, and organizational capacity.

**Potential Street Nursing Services**

- Basic health assessments and screening
- Wound assessment and care
- Chronic disease monitoring and education
- Medication-related education and support
- Infection prevention and health promotion
- Overdose prevention and harm reduction education
- Navigation and referral to healthcare and community resources
- Patient advocacy and assistance with continuity of care

The availability of each service must be determined by professional scope of practice, organizational authorization, available resources, and the ability to provide safe follow-up.

## 6. DEVELOP POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND SAFETY PROTOCOLS

Written policies and procedures establish expectations for safe, ethical, and consistent outreach operations.

**Essential Components**

**Professional Practice**

- Scope of nursing services and clinical responsibilities
- Professional standards and accountability
- Clinical consultation and referral procedures
- Medication management and treatment protocols

**Patient Rights and Privacy**

- Informed consent and voluntary participation
- Confidentiality and protection of patient information
- Respect for autonomy, dignity, and cultural differences
- Appropriate documentation and information-sharing practices

**Field Safety**

- Environmental and situational risk assessments
- Team composition and minimum staffing requirements
- Communication and emergency response procedures
- De-escalation and personal safety practices
- Exposure prevention and infection control
- Procedures for discontinuing outreach when conditions become unsafe

**Program Operations**

- Volunteer qualifications and responsibilities
- Orientation and competency requirements
- Supply management
- Incident reporting
- Referral and follow-up procedures
- Quality improvement processes

**Key Consideration:** Program leaders should review liability coverage, professional malpractice protections, institutional requirements, and applicable regulations before beginning clinical outreach.

## 7. SELECT EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES

Supplies should be selected according to anticipated healthcare needs, environmental conditions, professional scope of practice, and the program's available resources.

### Equipment

Reusable items needed to assess and provide care, including backpacks, assessment tools, and other clinical equipment.

### Medications and Wound Care Supplies

Materials used during patient encounters or provided to individuals for continued care.

- Select supplies based on commonly encountered conditions and anticipated patient needs.
- Ensure that over-the-counter and prescription medications are administered, dispensed, or distributed in accordance with applicable laws, authorized orders when required, organizational protocols, and professional scope of practice.
- Establish procedures for medication storage, transportation, expiration monitoring, and inventory management.
- Consider the individual's ability to safely store and use supplies in unsheltered environments.
- Provide understandable instructions for continued care and indications for seeking additional medical attention.

### Essential Outreach Supplies

Items distributed to address basic needs, promote hygiene, support health, and facilitate meaningful patient engagement.

- Prioritize practical items such as hygiene products, clean socks, drinking water, and weather-appropriate supplies.
- Consider seasonal conditions and limitations in personal storage.
- Respect individual preferences and expressed needs.
- Use supply distribution as an opportunity to establish trust and identify additional healthcare needs.
- Communicate honestly about resource availability and limitations.

### Risk Reduction Supplies

Materials provided to minimize health risks, prevent overdose and infectious disease transmission, and promote safer practices.

- Select supplies according to identified community risks and evidence-based harm reduction practices.
- Include appropriate materials such as naloxone, personal protective equipment, and other legally permissible risk reduction supplies.

- Provide nonjudgmental education regarding overdose recognition, emergency response, infection prevention, and safer practices.
- Respect individual autonomy and readiness to engage.
- Facilitate connections to treatment, recovery support, and additional healthcare services when desired.

### General Supply Management

- Establish secure storage and transportation procedures.
- Assign responsibility for inventory monitoring and replenishment.
- Monitor expiration dates and product integrity.
- Develop sustainable purchasing and donation processes.
- Avoid making commitments regarding supplies or services that cannot be fulfilled.

## 8. ESTABLISH CLINICAL DOCUMENTATION AND REFERRAL PROCEDURES

Street nursing encounters must be documented according to applicable professional, legal, and organizational requirements.

**Recommended Actions**

- Establish a secure and standardized method for documenting patient encounters.
- Identify essential clinical information to be recorded.
- Protect patient confidentiality and comply with applicable privacy requirements.
- Develop procedures for referrals to clinics, hospitals, behavioral health services, and community organizations.
- Establish processes for follow-up when feasible.
- Maintain appropriate records of services provided without unnecessarily collecting identifiable information.

Documentation should support continuity of care, professional accountability, and program evaluation.

## 9. DEVELOP A FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

Long-term sustainability requires financial planning, reliable partnerships, and realistic operational expectations.

**Recommended Actions**

- Identify anticipated start-up and recurring expenses.
- Develop a budget for equipment, clinical supplies, transportation, training, and administrative needs.
- Explore funding opportunities through grants, donations, healthcare organizations, academic institutions, and community partners.
- Establish appropriate financial oversight and accountability.
- Develop strategies for maintaining a consistent supply inventory.
- Evaluate opportunities for in-kind contributions and shared resources.
- Review financial sustainability before expanding services.

**Key Consideration:** Consistency and reliability are essential to building trust. Programs should avoid expanding beyond their ability to maintain safe and dependable services.

## 10. IMPLEMENT OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Programs should begin with a carefully planned implementation phase.

**Recommended Actions**

- Establish outreach schedules and locations in coordination with community partners.
- Confirm staffing, supervision, equipment, and emergency communication procedures before each activity.
- Conduct pre-outreach briefings to review responsibilities, environmental conditions, and safety concerns.
- Introduce services respectfully and explain the voluntary nature of participation.
- Obtain appropriate consent before providing care.
- Deliver services according to established clinical protocols.
- Facilitate referrals when patient needs exceed available field-based services.
- Conduct post-outreach debriefings to discuss clinical observations, operational challenges, safety concerns, and opportunities for improvement.

**Key Consideration:** Meaningful patient engagement depends on trust, consistency, and respect. The success of outreach should not be measured solely by the number of clinical encounters.

## 11. EVALUATE PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND QUALITY

Ongoing evaluation supports accountability, program improvement, and sustainability.

**Potential Evaluation Measures**

- Number and frequency of outreach activities
- Number of patient encounters
- Types of nursing services provided
- Common healthcare needs identified
- Referrals initiated and completed, when measurable
- Supplies and risk reduction materials distributed
- Community partnerships established
- Patient feedback and reported barriers to care
- Safety incidents and operational challenges
- Educational and professional development outcomes

**Recommended Actions**

- Establish measurable objectives before implementation.
- Review program data regularly.
- Identify service gaps and opportunities for improvement.
- Incorporate patient and community partner feedback.
- Adjust operations based on findings.
- Share aggregate outcomes with relevant stakeholders while protecting patient privacy.

## 12. PROMOTE ADVOCACY AND PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

Street nursing extends beyond the provision of immediate clinical services. It also creates opportunities to identify and address systemic barriers affecting individuals experiencing homelessness.

**Recommended Actions**

- Advocate for equitable access to healthcare and essential resources.
- Promote person-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive care.
- Collaborate with community organizations addressing housing instability, healthcare access, and social determinants of health.
- Support educational initiatives that reduce stigma toward individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Participate in professional networks and continuing education.
- Contribute to evidence-informed practice, quality improvement, and research when appropriate.

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# SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENT-DRIVEN STREET NURSING PROGRAMS

Healthcare academic institutions can play an important role in developing student-driven street nursing initiatives that combine community service with experiential learning.

These programs may operate through nursing schools, interdisciplinary student organizations, approved clinical courses, or partnerships with established community outreach organizations.

### 1. Establish Institutional Support

- Identify a faculty advisor or clinical coordinator with relevant expertise.
- Obtain appropriate institutional and administrative approvals.
- Determine whether activities qualify as academic clinical experiences, service learning, or extracurricular volunteer activities.
- Confirm liability coverage, supervision requirements, and student participation policies.
- Align program objectives with institutional missions and educational outcomes.

### 2. Define Student Roles and Supervision

- Clearly distinguish student responsibilities from those of licensed healthcare professionals.
- Establish appropriate faculty or clinical preceptor supervision.
- Ensure students perform only activities permitted by their educational preparation, institutional policies, and applicable laws.
- Define expectations for professional conduct, patient privacy, documentation, and clinical accountability.
- Develop procedures for managing situations that exceed student competency or program resources.

## 3. Provide Mandatory Orientation and Training

Before participating in outreach, students should complete orientation addressing:

- Principles and philosophy of street nursing
- Social determinants of health and barriers to care
- Trauma-informed care and cultural humility
- Professional boundaries and therapeutic communication
- Patient autonomy, informed consent, and confidentiality
- Scope of practice and clinical supervision
- Environmental and personal safety
- De-escalation and emergency response
- Infection prevention and exposure management
- Harm reduction principles
- Documentation and referral procedures

Orientation completion and competency requirements should be documented according to institutional policies.

## 4. Integrate Educational Objectives

Student participation should support clearly defined learning outcomes, such as:

- Assessing population health needs and social determinants of health.
- Applying clinical reasoning in nontraditional healthcare environments.
- Demonstrating compassionate, nonjudgmental, and culturally responsive communication.
- Collaborating effectively with interdisciplinary healthcare and community outreach teams.
- Recognizing professional limitations and practicing within authorized responsibilities.
- Reflecting on ethical challenges, health inequities, and patient autonomy.
- Identifying community resources and facilitating appropriate referrals.

Structured reflection, faculty-led debriefing, and student feedback can support experiential learning and professional development.

## 5. Establish Student Leadership and Succession Planning

Student-driven programs must anticipate regular leadership transitions due to graduation and academic schedules.

**Recommended Actions**

- Establish a student leadership structure with clearly defined responsibilities.
- Maintain faculty oversight and organizational continuity.
- Develop written operating procedures and orientation materials.
- Create a process for recruiting and preparing incoming student leaders.
- Maintain records of partnerships, activities, and program accomplishments.
- Establish realistic participation expectations that accommodate academic responsibilities.

**Key Consideration:** Student involvement should strengthen, rather than interrupt, the continuity of services established with community partners.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Developing a street nursing outreach program requires more than assembling healthcare professionals and supplies. It requires an understanding of the community, clearly defined clinical responsibilities, reliable partnerships, effective safety procedures, and a sustained commitment to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

Successful programs recognize that meaningful healthcare delivery begins with trust, respect, and an understanding of each individual's circumstances and priorities.

Whether led by practicing nurses, community organizations, or healthcare academic institutions, street nursing programs should remain grounded in professional accountability, evidence-based practice, patient autonomy, and equitable access to healthcare.

**The ultimate goal is not simply to bring healthcare to the streets, but to establish meaningful connections that support health, dignity, continuity of care, and opportunities for improved well-being.**

## SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This guide was developed using the program development framework presented in the *Street Medicine Institute Student Coalition's Guide to Developing a Student-Driven Street Medicine Program*. The original framework has been reorganized and adapted to emphasize nursing practice, interdisciplinary collaboration, patient safety, community engagement, and the development of both professional and student-driven street nursing outreach programs.


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