



A Impetus for Action to Address the Needs of Returning Citizens

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Abstract

In the early 2000s returning citizens' came into use meant to replace the stigmatized words 'ex-con,' 'ex-felon,' etc. A returning citizen is an individual returning home after being in prison. Many in this population return to the community with a history of chronic health conditions. It is vital to provide returning citizens with information and access to available health care resources within the community.

It can be challenging to access services and programs that exist post-release. It is essential to address the needs of these individuals because if health concerns were not addressed before release, serious complications could result. Providing access to resources that help identify care providers and support systems can impact health-seeking behaviors and ultimately promote an optimal level of health.

As a component of a doctoral project at Coppin State University Doctor of Nursing Practice program, a web-based health information site was developed and implemented to provide health care guidance to returning citizens, focusing on the importance of healthcare follow-up and community-based resources to help optimize their quality of life. This type of access allows for identification and accessibility to health resources within the community.

Providing information in a manner that is relevant and accessible such as a web-based health resource guide will help returning citizens identify and access health services available within the community.

Keywords: Chronic respiratory conditions; Diabetes; Nursing practice program

Introduction

Returning citizens are a vulnerable population in the United States that lack access to health care resulting in less than optimal health outcomes [1,2]. In the early 2000 decade, returning citizens were introduced to describe formerly incarcerated individuals reentering society [3]. It was reported that 43% of inmates in federal prisons and 39% of inmates in state prisons suffer from chronic health problems requiring daily attention [4,5].

The transition from prison to the community is a significant opportunity to affect health care outcomes. Providing access to resources that help identify care providers and support systems can impact health-seeking behaviors and ultimately promote health and address health conditions. Timely and well-identified interventions will help improve an individual's health, have implications for health promotion, and facilitate efficient health care delivery [6,7]. The first three weeks following release from prison appear to be a critical point in moderating less than optimal health outcomes [1,6].

The number of returning citizens entering the community has increased by 15%, partly due to overcrowded prisons [4,8]. As a result, many in this population return to the community with a history of chronic conditions. It is important to address the needs of these individuals because if health concerns are not addressed prior to release, serious complications can result, including the transmission of infectious disease, homelessness, and social disorganization [2,5]. The need for housing and access to health care is vital in providing needed assistance to these individuals.

Housing

The transition to the community process begins during incarceration. There is a period of readjustment that occurs post-release. Returning citizens often require assistance to help

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with readjusting and navigating the available services within the community. It can be challenging to access these services and programs post-release. Options that exist post-release include transitional homes. Transitional homes provide a safe, structured, supervised environment for returning citizens during this readjustment phase [9].

What is lacking is the level of information that addresses the individual's healthcare needs [10,5]. Transitional homes do not require in-house medical professionals to provide healthcare treatment to the residents staying within these homes. A web-based health information site would be helpful when implemented in these settings. A web-based health information site will allow transitional homes to provide health care guidance to returning citizens, focusing on the importance of healthcare follow-up and community-based resources to help optimize their quality of life. This type of access will allow easy identification and accessibility to health resources within the community. In addition, it provides a window of opportunity to address health concerns, housing, education, and safety prior to this population returning to the community.

Chronic Diseases

The rates of many chronic diseases for incarcerated populations are more than double that of the general population [11]. These chronic diseases include diabetes (5.0% vs. 2.4%), chronic respiratory conditions (e.g., Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), 34.1% vs. 19.2%), and liver disease (10.0% vs. 0.6%) [11,4]. In addition, rates of communicable diseases such as Hepatitis C, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and tuberculosis are higher in incarcerated populations (e.g., 3.5% vs. 0.4% for HIV among 25 to 34-year olds) [11].

Follow-up care to address and monitor individuals diagnosed with a chronic disease is essential and has to be the initial step in health care maintenance. In addition, providing information in a manner that is relevant and accessible such as a web-based health guide will help returning citizens identify health services available within the community.

Conclusion

It is an impetus to provide returning citizens with the available health care resources within the community. An estimated 44% of state inmates and 39% of federal inmates reported suffering from

chronic health, physical health, mental health, or substance abuse (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2018) [9]. These individuals will return to the community and require follow-up health care. These health conditions make it harder for returning citizens to reintegrate into the community after incarceration successfully. Unsuccessful reintegration into the community increases the chances to maintain stable employment, housing, family connections, and sobriety, ultimately leading to recidivism [1,6].

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