



## Christian Commitment | Loving God, Loving People

What does it mean for Lawndale Christian Health Center (LCHC) to be Christian? Is it a nod to our history, founded by members of Lawndale Community Church? Or does it identify the beliefs and values of our leaders and employees? How does a Christian institution function in practice beyond its mission to show and share the love of Jesus? These are questions that LCHC faces daily, questions that Ernest Gray Jr., LCHC's Director of Spiritual Care, is helping to consider following his many years as a professor and pastor.

Upon his arrival, Pastor Gray witnessed the clinic's strong Christian commitment in its prayerful gatherings, spiritual encouragement cards in exam rooms, faith and medicine discussions, and values of equity and diversity. These are important aspects of care because, as Pastor Gray explains, "the spiritual components of people inform their physical resilience." He is also aware of the social injustices that can exacerbate health concerns. "The issues our patients face are complicated by racism and heightened by systemic issues," Pastor Gray says. His empathy allows him to see the impact of these burdens on patients' lives.

Driven by the desire to promote the Christian wellbeing of each person, Pastor Gray constantly seeks ways to make spiritual knowledge more accessible. Using the warm handoff model where the patient's primary care physician makes same-day, personal introductions to a specialist, Pastor Gray envisions providers referring patients to him so he can meet with them, discuss spiritual concerns, or receive prayer requests.

Pastor Gray's role currently manifests in weekly routines that include mentoring, counseling, and working in proximity to people. While his "ministry of presence" could become very difficult when applied to over 600 staff members and hundreds of patients daily, Pastor Gray equips fellow employees to be spiritual leaders themselves. His goal is to empower staff to actively live out their calling by providing spiritual care to patients and coworkers, instead of seeing themselves as providers or staff who happen to be Christian.

Fittingly, proximal ministry was the topic of the First Fridays meeting this July. First Fridays are LCHC's monthly faith and medicine discussions, organized in part by Pastor Gray. This month, prior to hearing from New Life Center's Executive Director Matt DeMateo about their services for displaced migrants and asylum seekers, Pastor Gray provided the theological precedent for being near to those in need and caring for one's neighbors. In the book of Deuteronomy alone, helping immigrants and foreigners is commanded over ten times. LCHC's work is done in response to God's great love, "For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." While LCHC may not have every answer for what it means to be a Christian organization, we can hold fast to our motto and call to "Loving God. Loving People."



Matt DeMateo, Executive Director of New Life Centers, shares about their work with migrants at the First Fridays meeting in July

## Caring for our New Neighbors | Healthcare for Migrants

### *Piotrowski Park*

Since August of 2022, over 11,500 men, women, and children have arrived in Chicago seeking asylum, more than doubling the number of people staying in shelters in the city of Chicago. Shelters have been set up across the city to house incoming migrant families, primarily from Venezuela - the largest shelter currently houses over 1,400 people in a hotel downtown.

As an extension of LCHC's existing work in shelters across the city, LCHC's Mobile Health Team has partnered with the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) to help address the healthcare needs of displaced families staying in shelters. The Mobile Health Team (MHT), consisting of 17 providers and 12 support staff, has willingly stepped in and added three new shelters to its rotation - including Piotrowski Park in Little Village.



When Raul Juarez, Site Manager for the MHT, received the news that Piotrowski Park would be housing asylum seekers, he immediately felt that LCHC should be involved in providing care there. "I grew up going to Piotrowski Park, and it's so close to the health center," he said. "The next week I was able to visit the space with Matt from New Life Centers, and within just a few days we sorted out all of the logistics so that we could start seeing patients there."

The proximity of Piotrowski has allowed the Mobile Health Team to easily refer patients for follow-up appointments at LCHC's Ogden Avenue clinics. "This is a challenge we experience with our other shelter sites where it's difficult for people to get to LCHC. But Piotrowski is a short walk or bus ride away, and having greater access to care is life-changing for these families," Raul shared.

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### *New Neighbors*

On their first day at Piotrowski, LCHC providers spoke with a family whose son had been suffering from asthma attacks and wheezing. The family had been given a prescription from the hospital that did their initial health screening when they arrived in Chicago, but they had no way of filling it and the instructions were in English. The Mobile Health Team immediately coordinated with LCHC's pharmacy to get this family the necessary medications that same day.

The family has since begun to integrate into the Little Village community. "Their son is attending the same summer program as my daughter," Raul said, "and there's something so beautiful about having a shelter site here in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, so that it doesn't feel so foreign to our new neighbors. This community has really come together to help the families arriving here."



After over a month of travel, this family arrived in Chicago with their three sons. They are extremely grateful for the help they've received from LCHC since staying at Piotrowski. "They've taken care of us here – whenever we've needed healthcare they have helped us," the mother shared. She explained that their kids were enjoying the summer program, and that she and her husband were getting help to acquire work permits so they can continue to settle in. "The only support we really need now is a place to stay – our own place, a stable place. That will be the next thing," she said.

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### *Expanding our Work*

The MHT quickly adapts to unpredictability. Never knowing what needs may arise in the shelter that day, they've applied the same tenacity to the new challenge of serving hundreds more people experiencing homelessness per week.

"Several unique needs have continued to stretch us," Dr. Huggett, the Medical Director of Mobile Health, shares. "And of course, many asylum seekers are in need of Behavioral Health Services to address the trauma they've experienced both in their home countries and on the journey here." The MHT has heard many stories about crossing the Darien Gap – a break in the Pan-American Highway that stretches 106 kilometers and has no roads, services, or cellphone signals. Many asylum seekers have had to travel on foot through this unbuilt area where they encounter dangerous terrain, flash floods, wild animals, diseases, robbery, and fatalities.

"Many of our staff feel they have similar histories," Dr. Huggett says. "They share that their parents or grandparents were in the same position many years ago that these families are now, and they care for newly arrived persons the way they would care for their own family member." The team has also added to its ranks by pulling in more providers and support staff who do not normally visit shelter partners. "They catch on very quickly and ask us to let them know where they can help," explains Dr. Huggett.



Some members of LCHC's Mobile Health Team at a recent team meeting

Despite unexpected medical challenges among the sheltered new arrivals, including an outbreak of chicken pox and multiple cases of tuberculosis, LCHC's team provided over 50 chicken pox vaccines to those at risk who had not yet gotten ill. Similarly, they have worked closely with CDPH to screen for tuberculosis and get the x-rays and treatment for affected individuals.

LCHC continues to collaborate with partners such as the City of Chicago, New Life Centers, the Chicago Furniture Bank, and others to meet the needs of the newly arrived families. While the City of Chicago has found funding to support some of LCHC's work with the Mobile Health Team, more support is needed to ensure that both asylum seekers and other shelter guests around Chicago receive the medical care they need. You can come alongside our teams and our new neighbors by donating at the link below.

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