

Jordan Reif
Northeast Ohio Neighborhood Health Services
Wellman Hill Recipient, Summer 2021

Thanks to the Wellman Hill Grant, I worked as a summer intern in the Behavioral Health Department (BHD) at Northeast Ohio Neighborhood Health Services (NEON) clinic in the Corlett neighborhood on the southeast side of Cleveland. I'm extremely grateful for the scholarship so that I was able to pursue this position without concern for financial security. As a student studying Political Science, Biology, and Bioethics, this position was at the crux of my interests: how social, political, and economic factors affect access to, and quality of, healthcare.

NEON is one of the federally qualified health centers (FQHC) in Cleveland; this designation makes NEON eligible for federal funding based on their patient population, most of whom are on Medicaid and/or Medicare. In other words, many of the patients who rely on NEON clinics are low-income, underinsured, or uninsured. The BHD provides short- and long-term counseling and partners with the primary care physicians for a medication-assisted treatment (MAT) program. The MAT program combines counseling with medication (suboxone) to treat substance-use disorders. This program is a great example of the overarching philosophy at NEON where social determinants of health (SDOH) are just as, if not more, important than the physiological issues. As we see in neighborhoods across Cleveland and the country, clean air and water, lead-free housing, healthy food, and safe communities are all major contributors to health. While I was there, the BHD was also working to build up a standard of "warm handoffs"—encouraging providers to make counseling available to patients at the same visit. For many patients, co-payments can be a barrier to seeing a doctor; every additional co-payment is another obstacle. Warm handoffs are a way for patients to see their primary care physician and a mental health professional on the same day for *one* co-payment.

In efforts to emphasize the importance of SDOH, I was assigned to research and produce bimonthly newsletters on different issues that affect the NEON patient population. Topics included gun violence, sickle cell, hepatitis, vision health, breastfeeding, immunization, childhood obesity, sexual health, and more. Each newsletter included background information on the topic, more specific framing of the topic within Northeast Ohio, policy recommendations to address the issue and any disparities, and suggestions for what NEON (at an individual and organizational level) can do to address the topic. These newsletters were sent out to the entire NEON network and used as a framework to discuss addressing SDOH within the BHD.

There are other FQHCs in Cleveland, including Circle Health Services and Care Alliance, and other organizations that provide social, economic, and legal support for people who are low-income or have marginalized identities. The BHD wanted to create more of a network between these organizations to ease referrals and be able to collaborate on problems that are shared across the city. I connected with over a dozen organizations—in categories of addiction, victim and abuse, mental health, and social services—in order to document a full list of services provided, share the goals and programs at NEON, and exchange contact information. This guide is now available to all BHD workers to use and accessible for updates as employment changes or new services become available.

Two other programs on which I worked were related to COVID-19 vaccination and providing healthy food. Every Thursday, NEON partners with the Greater Cleveland Food Bank for the Food as Medicine program, which provides free boxes of fresh produce. The program moves to different centers around the east side each week to be accessible to multiple

communities. On Fridays, I worked with two nurses to administer COVID-19 vaccines. I helped inform patients of the vaccination process, potential side-effects, and address misinformation concerns. This was a two-fold process which included calling nearly 1000 patients and talking with approximately 200 others in-person.

The opportunity to work at NEON last summer solidified my interest in working in healthcare and with health policy. The BHD emphasized the critical role health policy plays in ensuring that people have access to high-quality health insurance, and I am grateful to the Wellman Hill program for allowing me to work on these issues.