

Hospital Sisters Health System (HSHS) St. John's Hospital staff provide more than just healthcare to Springfield's chronically homeless population. Registered nurses volunteer at the Winter Warming Center homeless shelter, addressing frostbite, open sores and other problems, particularly involving the patients' feet.

Due to the amount of time spent outside—combined with economic, mental health and/or substance-abuse problems—the patients often aren't able to bathe regularly, change their socks or wear properly fitting shoes. These conditions can result in sores and open wounds on their feet.

HSHS nurses gently clean the patients' feet in warm, soapy water and trim neglected toenails. Follow-up exams with medical providers address issues like blisters, corns and calluses. For more serious issues, providers refer shelter clients to free clinics for care. Nurses are careful not to make any existing health conditions worse—for example, they don't apply bandages because they don't know whether patients will be unable to change the bandages, which could make an infection worse.

Shelter clients benefit from this compassionate service, appreciating the brief respite from their circumstances. The service also helps build trust in medical providers and allows providers to identify potential infections and untreated chronic conditions, noted Kimberly Luz, director of community outreach for the central Illinois division of HSHS.

In one case, nurse Austin Carey learned a patient who had received a check for prescriptions from Memorial Medical Center couldn't get to a pharmacy for his medications. Carey informed Warming Center manager Ronetta Hamilton, who drove to the pharmacy to retrieve the patient's prescriptions.

"It's very moving," Luz said. "It's more than healthcare."

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