Many students and members of the community are unaware of the vast range of work done by a nurse in public health. Recently, a group of senior nursing students from UW-Milwaukee interviewed Annette Schmidt, a public health nurse (PHN) for the city of Cudahy Health Department. Annette started off as a staff nurse in a hospital and made her way into public health seventeen years ago. She currently works in adult health, specifically with communicable disease investigation, education and follow-up, as well as with the Refugee Health Program.

One of Annette’s recent projects focused on working with Somali, Congo and Iraqi refugees. She has seen an increase in the amount of work she does with the refugee population. Over the past five years she had one refugee client, but now she manages care for 29 refugees. Annette collaborated with refugee health partners to map how each agency assists the newly arrived refugee in an effort to establish better communication and improve care coordination.

The major goal for this project is more systematic, meaning the development of a seamless approach on how to communicate with the refugee’s health partners to coordinate care so that the refugees can get their required health care in a timely manner, upon arrival to the United States. Once implemented, navigating the health care system will be easier for all agencies and refugees involved; this will ultimately help the refugees.

Annette has experienced an increase in the ease of communication between other providers and the refugees. She also mentioned that working with the refugees has been a great reward and has provided a wealth of new community relationships.

One of the challenges that she has experienced in this project is the variety of capabilities and ways of carrying out responsibilities among the different agencies. Initially it was hard to learn these differences and how best to work with each other, but consistency is important to meet the needs of the refugee clients. Other challenges include the complex needs of many of the refugees, language barriers, and the diminutive availability of resources for this population.

As a public health nurse, Annette says it is rewarding to have as much autonomy as she does and that she is able to manage her time based on work priorities. Her job also provides variability in her day and a much-less-structured work environment that requires her to be flexible and use problem-solving skills for atypical circumstances. Though this is a big draw to the position, she says that for someone interested in being a PHN, a desire to work in that type of work environment and a few years of experience is helpful.

Annette also enjoys working with different populations and experiencing positive outcomes for her clients, finding it rewarding to provide resources to her client families. Although she mentions the position can be mentally challenging, she is able to be creative in her work and recognizes that clients are appreciative of her efforts.

Some of the challenges to being a PHN are the constant changes in health care, shifting funding sources, and available resources for the populations they serve. A PHN has to be flexible and stay current on what is going on in health care, and to be able to explain those changes to the populations they serve.

Annette hopes to provide more education, reaching larger groups of people in the community, as she continues on her path in public health nursing.

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