How do you spend your time as a social worker in the emergency department with the expansion of the emergency department?

- "We spend a large amount of time working with patients with mental health concerns. We assist with other patient needs regarding transportation, home health care needs, resources, advanced directives, chemical dependency, financial/inheritance, and nursing home placement. We address maltreatment concerns. We respond to trauma, priority patients, and patients who have been sexually assaulted. Lastly, we are utilized as a backup on the inpatient units."

- "Having enough time to see every patient that we deal with in the emergency department."

What could be changed to improve your ability to perform your role as an emergency department social worker?

- "Having enough time to see everyone that has a need, while at the same time providing the best care to everyone."

- "Longer wait times for patients."

- "Further training on personality disorders and mental illness."

Describe the strengths of your work environment that allow your role to be done well.

- "I think we are all very team-oriented and willing to help each other out. I appreciate that. Even through I work alone, I never feel alone."

- "The support of the workers and the patients that are able to be helped, and the respect that you are given."

- "The support of the social work department and the nurses."

Implications and Recommendations

- Research should be continued to reveal if ED social workers are still providing the best care possible.

- Data on patient wait time should be added to the regular data collection instrument. It is suggested that such information should be continually tracked and appropriate staffing changes be based on this data.

- The emergency social service department should look into training opportunities for the social workers in relation to mental illness, personality disorders, and the commitment and revocation processes.

- Social workers should be constantly looking for and sharing resources in the community that could benefit the patients seen.

- The emergency department should sustain their supportive work environment and keep the lines of communication open between all staff members. The support of fellow coworkers was listed by the majority of the participants as a strength of the organization that allows the social workers to perform their role well.

- Continuous education for staff members and for staff at other agencies is critical to maintaining a positive work environment.

Results

- All participants agreed with the statement: “I feel needed by the staff and the patients in the emergency department.”

- Two most common duties among all participants were conducting behavioral health assessments and providing supportive counseling services.

- The second most common response of participants to the question of how they spend their time when working in the emergency department was communicating and working with the other staff members.

- The main concern with the expansion of the ED was being able to provide the best care possible to every patient with the projected increase in patient volume. Participants gave examples of being very busy during their shifts and having to stay late to chart. Working thirteen to fourteen hour shifts and not being compensated for this extra time could be detrimental to the care of the patients and could create resentment and hostility in the work environment.

- Increase in patient volume equates to an increase in patients with behavioral health needs, an area of concern. The behavioral health unit in the main hospital has not been expanded, which results in the ED social workers spending additional resources placing a patient on an outside facility, which adds complexity such as working with policies of other facilities, coordinating transportation, and providing resources for the family.

- Participants were concerned with the increased waiting time for patients in the ED. The increased volume of patients increases the demand on the social workers and results in additional wait times for other patients.

- Participants made suggestions on ways to eliminate and reduce these concerns and needs within the ED. Participants suggested collecting data about how social workers’ time is spent in the ED. Currently, the ED records every interaction with patients and with other at facilities. Participants suggested adding wait time for the patient to these forms, which would allow the department to see how patient volume has changed and is affecting both wait time and case time. Based on the information collected, the department would then be able to adjust staffing as needed.

- The second most common suggestion was to make staffing changes or plan ahead for staffing changes; a smaller number of participants stated that the current staffing coverage is sufficient. The most common suggestions in this area: 1) hire additional social work staff to help cover in the ED from 7am-12am. 2) have an individual that could be contacted for back-up assistance when needed. 3) start budgeting ahead of time for additional full-time staff members as the early experience with expansion has shown an increase in patient volume.

- Participants expressed various suggestions on how their ability to perform their role as a social worker in the ED could be improved. Responses suggested that work is difficult and draining. One participant stated that being able to take time off would allow her to take a break and enjoy her job more. Another stated that being responsible for the entire facility on the weekends or holidays can be overwhelming and additional staffing and additional education to all staff and services are not compensated.

- Some participants suggested more training. Two participants requested more information about certain topics currently prevalent in the ED such as working with individuals who are civically committed and the process surrounding the revocation of a stay of commitment. Another participant requested more training on mental illness and personality disorders.

- The survey indicated that more community resources would improve social workers’ ability to perform their role in the ED. Being in a smaller city and serving rural areas often limits the resources available to the patients.

- The main strength reported by the participants was the support and teamwork of the ED staff. Participants reported feeling respected and appreciated by individuals and disciplines. The emergency social services department should continue to maintain open lines of communication and understand the roles of each different disciplines. Educating other staff about the role of an ED social worker is key to working successfully with colleagues and being able to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of patients.

- At the same time, some participants mentioned getting “dumped on” by other agencies. Educating these agencies about the role of the social worker in the ED and what services could be provided would reduce the amount of instances where the social worker feels this negative sentiment.

- When asked for additional comments, one individual stated that the ED should conduct regular assessments of staffing needs as the role of a hospital social worker is still fairly new and the clinical abilities and expertise of social workers are still being recognized. Also, with the expansion of the emergency department, staffing should be addressed to better meet the needs of the patients.

Summary and References available upon request.