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## Needs Assessment of Emergency Department Social Workers in Southwestern Minnesota in Relation to Emergency Department Expansion

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## Abstract

Expansion of a hospital emergency department will affect the role of the emergency department social worker. This research project was conducted to assess the needs, concerns, and strengths of the social workers working in the emergency department of a regional medical center. The study included 13 participants who completed an on-line survey. Results showed that participants were concerned with the increase in patient volume as well as the possible increase in wait time for patients. Participants also expressed how concerns could be addressed. The most common solution was to track information about the cases, including wait times for patients, in which the emergency department social workers were involved or were not able to see. The participants offered many suggestions on how to improve their role as social workers in the emergency department in relation to the expansion of the emergency department.

## Literature Review

- Purpose of the emergency department (ED) medical team is to triage patients for admission into the hospital for acute medical conditions, respond to traumas with the proper treatment, and provide medical care to those who cannot or do not access primary care (Moore, Ekman, & Shumway, 2012).
- There is growing evidence of a recent increase in ED use (Niska, Bhuiya, & Xu, 2010; Moore, Ekman, & Shumway, 2012; Cooper & Masi, 2007).
- Increased ED use can be partially attributed to the ED's function as a medical safety net for underserved (Moore, Ekman, & Shumway, 2012).
- Many who utilize the ED as a safety net system present with multiple medical, economic, and social needs (Tang, Stein, Hsia, Maselli, & Gonzales, 2010).
- Many individuals visiting the ED are in need of social services in order to secure safety and prevent re-entry (Auerbach & Mason, 2010). EDs are often the entry point for many individuals with behavioral health needs into the social service system.
- Such visits can be the patient's only contact with health or social service systems and therefore it is a crucial practice setting for social workers (Moore, Ekman, & Shumway, 2012).

With the expansion of the ED due to increased patient volume, the needs of the social service department within the ED should be assessed. The general purpose of this research project was to assess the expansion of the emergency department and how this expansion is affecting the role of the emergency department social workers in a particular hospital. This project examined the resource and work needs of social workers as well as documented the importance of and need for social workers in the emergency department.

## Methodology

The data for this study were obtained through an on-line survey conducted through the web-based tool SurveyMonkey. The survey link was distributed by the hospital Director of Social Services via e-mail to the participants. The target population was any individual who was currently employed by the specific healthcare system and was either an emergency department social worker or a social worker who had covered the emergency department or continues to cover the emergency department. Thirteen individuals fit this criteria and received this survey. All 13 completed the survey for a response rate of 100%. The survey began on April 30, 2012 when the link was sent in an email to the participants. A reminder email was sent a week later on May 7, 2012. The survey was closed on May 21, 2012 and a thank you email was sent to the participants. The survey consisted of qualitative questions regarding concerns surrounding the expansion of the emergency department as well as statements to be evaluated with a four point Likert-Type scale. The survey also contained a few demographic questions. The qualitative data were reviewed by the author of this research report to identify common themes that were prevalent across the participants' experiences and responses. The author conducted multiple readings of the data gathered in order to extract the appropriate themes.

Seven of the thirteen participants (53.8%) stated that their assigned area of coverage was the emergency department. These participants will be referred to as emergency department social workers. Six of the thirteen participants (46.2%) stated that their assigned primary area of coverage was *not* the emergency department. These participants will be referred to as *coverage* emergency department social workers. Of the emergency department social workers, the median number of years working as an emergency department social worker was 1 year. The mean was 2.4 years. Of the coverage emergency department social workers, the median number of years working as an emergency department social worker was 3 years. The mean was 3.5 years. Of the emergency department social workers, the median number of years practicing social work overall was 6 years. The mean was 5.6 years. Of the coverage emergency department social workers, the median number of years practicing social work overall was 4.5 years. The mean was 5.9 years.

## Participants' Quotes

### How do you spend your time as a social worker in 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/insurance, and nursing home placement. We address maltreatment concerns. We respond to traumas, priority patients, and patients who have been sexually assaulted. Lastly, we are utilized as a backup on the inpatient units."*

### What needs or concerns do you foresee as a social worker in the emergency department with the expansion of the emergency department?

*"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."*

### How would you recommend the above needs or concerns be addressed?

*"Continue to track the amount of patients seen in the emergency room to assess the amount of cases emergency department social workers are involved in. If the stats increase then increased staffing may need to be addressed."*

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

*"More staff on some days. It is very emotionally and physically draining to deal with some of the cases that we deal with down in the emergency department."  
"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 orientated and willing to help each other out. I appreciate that. Even through I work alone, I never feel alone."*



## Implications and Recommendations

- Research should be continued to reveal if ED social workers are still providing the best care possible and are able to see every patient the emergency department medical staff recommends with the increase in patient volume.
- 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.
- Continual 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 workers at other 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. There were three main 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 staff should be added so services are not compromised.
- Some participants suggested more training. Two participants requested more information about certain topics recently prevalent in the ED such as working with individuals who are civilly 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 in other 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.