



# A HELPING HAND

Local universities team up to provide house calls for area residents

by GRACE SALERNO and JACKIE YOO

Truman State University and the renowned osteopathic medical school, [A.T. Still University](#), both located in Kirksville, Mo., have teamed up to offer House Calls: a home-visiting program whose goal is to improve communication between elderly patients and physicians and nurses.

The House Calls program offers an interdisciplinary curriculum, with Truman students from the health science, communication disorders, and nursing fields working in teams with [ATSU's Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine](#) students to provide program participants with health checkups four times annually.

Students involved in the program provide patients with assessments of wellness such as checking their blood pressures, nutrition, exercise and diet regimens, patient health history and health

care. This also includes educating the patients on how well they understand the medical field.

Another task is to test their patients' vital signs to see if any significant changes have occurred since the last visit, including a review of medications or surgical histories that may impact the patients' current lifestyles.

## MAKING AN IMPACT

The heart of House Calls, though, is the communication that occurs between the patients and the student nurses and physicians, who learn to ask questions that will screen patients for signs of depression or to check if they're exercising properly.

They also try to glean what goals patients might have for themselves and help them achieve these, if feasible. For example, if a patient's goal is to exercise

twice a week, the students will help them to increase the amount of exercise by encouraging them and coming up with new exercise plans.

Such relationships help students develop a sense of how patients communicate, learning to listen to what isn't said and to see how much patients have opened up to the students over time. Some patients have negative attitudes about this approach in the beginning, but they gradually change their attitudes toward the end of the program and create a strong family relationship with these students.

"To find illness is not the point," says Stephanie Powelson, head of Truman's Nursing Department. "To me, it's more about finding patients with whom you can communicate."

To participate in the program, patients

do not have to be ill. Some participate because it offers a free method for a full check-up. For others, the program may be the only medical care they see all year, since they aren't able to make it to a doctor's office.

For the patients who are ill, though, the program provides much-needed help.

Truman nursing student Courtney McIntire says a lot of these patients don't have the money to see doctors on a regular basis.

"We're not nearly anything like regular doctors, but we are here for this program, which is more for encouraging and screening for more severe cases," McIntire says.

Students test their patients for health literacy, which means the extent to which patients are able to comprehend medical terms to ensure they understand their conditions. Such medical terms include [chronic disease](#), eponym or gastro.

During the students' last of four visits, they assess their patients' progress and make a list of goals for the future. Those might include getting more exercise or incorporating better foods into their daily diets.

## FOUNDATION OF PROGRAM

The House Calls program was founded in the early 1990s by [Janet A. Head](#) a registered nurse and assistant professor in the department of family medicine, preventative medicine, and community health at A.T. Still. The program relies on volunteers from both campuses who collaborate on planning and carrying out different assessments for the patients with teams of nursing, health sciences and communication disorders students.

In order to participate in the program, some students volunteer and others are required to participate as part of their curriculum. Although there is no specific matching process for pairing students with the patients they will be working with, all inter-professional groups do work primarily with elders.

A government grant provided the initial startup funds, but the program is now primarily funded through ATSU's programs in Aging Studies and the Inter-Professional Education program. The federal government continues to offer



very limited funding through the Health Education Program.

Unlike House Calls, which has teams visit patients in their homes, the universities around the country that offer outreach programs require patients to physically come to their labs for testing and assessment.

## THE FUTURE

Head says House Calls will focus its future efforts on how to more efficiently involve other professions, such as the health sciences, to further enhance the care being offered to the patients involved with the program.

When the program was initially founded, Head says she had hoped to create a healthy, positive, and safe environment for nurses and patients to interact.

Now Head and other faculty are planning to have case competitions between KCOM and Truman students. Each set of faculty and students would develop different case studies, then trade them and share the information they have learned.

"We all have such passion for it," says Head. "It wouldn't have happened without any passion from students and faculty members. ... It is amazing to watch this evolution." 



**TOP:** During House Calls, ATSU and Truman students are grouped into teams. ATSU student Sadia Hussain, and Truman students Caitlyn Davis and Rebekah Hall, talk with fellow participants about their experiences.

**ABOVE:** ATSU student Meleah Simone and Truman student Mitch Stewart were one of the teams for the fall 2012 program.

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