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CEO Darcy J. Davis explores service to homeless with Brumback Clinics nurse Tom Walczak

Health Care District Chief Executive Officer Darcy J. Davis recently spent the day with Tom Walczak, RN, Senior Clinical Nurse with the District's C. L. Brumback Primary Care Clinics, as he cared for homeless patients in John Prince Park in Lake Worth.

Tom is part of Palm Beach County's HOT Team, a collaborative group of community partners that focuses on targeted outreach to the homeless in the county.

Darcy shared her experience with Health Care District employees in a special communication, called "Walk a Mile in Your Shoes."



Tom Walczak, Senior Clinical Nurse

In this inaugural issue of "Walk a Mile in Your Shoes" I had the privilege of shadowing Tom Walczak, RN in the homeless camp at John Prince Park. I've heard about Tom. Great things in fact.

I know that he was recently honored by the Palm Healthcare Foundation for his work as Senior Clinical Nurse with the C. L. Brumback Primary Care Clinic at the Senator Philip D. Lewis Center and his efforts in the community.

I have also used his name generously as County Commissioners and others have asked what the Health Care District is doing to assist with this raging homeless epidemic in our community.

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But other than a quick photo opportunity with him at the Palm Healthcare reception where he was honored, I really don't think I appreciated the challenges and difficulty of his job. I mean, how many of us are truly comfortable walking up to homeless people and engaging them about their issues?

Preparing for a zeld trip

I was excited when I got up this morning. Today was very reminiscent of my days in elementary school when I knew I had a field trip. It was a well-deserved day away from the office. I wanted to dress the part, because I certainly didn't want to be out of place.

District logo shirt so I look like I know what I'm doing. Check.

Jeans so I'm not overdressed. Check.

Comfortable shoes in case there is a lot of walking. Check.

Don't put on too much jewelry or make-up. Check.

Baseball hat so I don't get sunburned.

Boy was I prepared; look at me planning ahead. I was definitely ready to go.

Meeting up with Tom

I showed up with a bag of HCD sunscreen (there I was planning again) and my entourage, Chris Irizarry, Robin Kish and Lori Miller. After all, we wanted to document this experience and make sure that we were able to do justice to Tom's story.

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But it quickly became evident that more was not merrier and photos were

going to be scarce. Tom was all business. He had Chris and I jump into a van with him and his cohorts from the County Homeless Services Division who were doing housing assessments. We piled in on top of papers and folders, and maybe someone's unfinished breakfast.

They explained that they worked out of this vehicle all but one day a week and often they had to interview some of their candidates for possible housing in this van. Since they were looking for someone that they needed to assess in the park today, they couldn't guarantee they could give us a ride back.

No worries, we were still excited to experience the unknown and up for anything that would be thrown at us today. But, Robin always the pragmatist, followed us in her van, guaranteeing that we wouldn't get stranded in the park.



Tom and Darcy compare shoes

Entering the park

Today was Tuesday. This is the day that Tom makes rounds at John Prince Park. At noon, in an area that I can best describe as a group of picnic tables between the water and the road, where several churches volunteer to serve food each day. This is where the homeless start to congregate.

I watched a lady drive up in a beat-up, old van with a dog, (that looked much like mine), strategically park under the one tree casting any shade. A guy in flip-flops with a tattered T-shirt rode up on his bicycle. People were coming from every direction.

Some looked like the stereotypical homeless people you see panhandling, and others didn't look like they should be there. There was no screaming or yelling or anyone that I could see talking to themselves. It was a fairly docile group who started lining up for food, even before the volunteers arrived to set up the tables.

Tom goes to work

As I was still taking in my surroundings and sizing up the experience, Tom was already going to work. I wandered up tentatively beside him while he was engaged in a conversation with a man named "Jack." He knew Jack from previous encounters and was following up with him to see if he had gone to the clinic as previously instructed.

Jack paused, told me I was "as pale as a milk jug" and handed me back some of the HCD sunscreen that he had helped himself to, and then kept updating Tom on his condition.

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While I listened, a few others started lining up beside me to wait for their turn to talk to Tom. I tried to be helpful by volunteering some information about the clinics and how they could access care, even without a funding source, but that was old news to them...and definitely out of order for Tom.

He has a system. He knows these folks and they respect him. Tom was taking down the basics of people's names and birthdates, along with key information about recent hospital stays, while simultaneously calling back to the District to set up appointments and passing out County-issued bus passes.

He worked his way through the 60 or so individuals as they started eating their food. Meanwhile, I started talking with "Frank."

Frank's Story

"Frank" was a nice enough looking guy. He was in his mid-60's from the look of him. Clean shaven with a baseball hat, T-shirt and shorts. Nothing extraordinary about him, but he seemed approachable. Upon inquiry, Frank said that he used to work in a park much like this one as a supervisor, making \$25 an hour. He worked in that capacity for many years until drinking got the best of him.

He said he called out of work so many days last year that he got fired. Then his wife left him, and he ended up right there in a place much like he used to work. But, now he wasn't getting paid to be there. He was living there.

He laughed and rubbed his large stomach and said "Food is not a problem for me. My problem is COPD and of course, I still need to stop

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drinking.”

He said he lives off of \$300 a month right now, but hopes that in October he will be eligible for his social security checks. He is managing his COPD with the help of Tom and the clinics. When he gets his social security checks, his plan is to move to North with some family because where they live it's a dry county with no alcohol.

Frank is managing to get by for now. He said he is truly grateful that someone cares about his medical condition. He wants to live at least until October and he knows Tom will be back to check on him next Tuesday.



Tom explains his process to Darcy

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Why do we do it?

My experience with Tom today was invaluable. In this new role, it is important to me that everything we spend money on supports the purpose of the Health Care District.

As a taxpayer-funded organization, we are responsible to the citizens who pay our salaries and we should be confident that everything we do is in line with our mission.

Today I truly saw the HEALTH CARE SAFETY NET of Palm Beach County in its most raw form. If the clinics are the front door to our services, then this was our front yard.

Tom's intervention with these individuals is going to keep them out of hospitals and help them get the much needed care that will keep them from becoming sicker or infecting others.

This is the right thing to do for our community and Tom is the right guy to do it!

Save one life and you are a hero...
Save 100 lives and you are a **NURSE!**

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NURSE OF THE WEEK

A nurse's concern goes well beyond nursing care



Tom Walczak, RN, is a nurse who compassionately treats homeless patients at the C. L. Brumback Primary Care Clinic at the Senator Philip D. Lewis Center.

Fluent in Spanish and French, Tom is a competent and skilled nursing professional. His excellent nursing care does not end with the treatments he delivers to dress a painful wound or alleviate a chronic health condition. Tom's ultimate goal is that his caring and concern will translate into better life circumstances for his patients.

A member of Palm Beach County's Homeless Outreach Team representing the Healthcare District of Palm Beach County's Brumback Clinics, Tom sees his patients in the clinic and in the field, ensuring that they receive needed medications. He helps them comply with their treatments, even in the most adverse living conditions. His passion and medical knowledge help build patient trust and often result, not only in good health outcomes, but also in resolving homeless situations for many of his patients.

The patients Tom treats often suffer from extremely complex health conditions exacerbated by chronic homelessness. His calm and reassuring manner delivers

'Service is my reward.'

Tom Walczak

incredible results. Colleagues are awed by his numerous positive encounters with hard-to-reach homeless patients. For example, Tom gained the trust of one patient with advanced cancer in dire need of medical care and was able to arrange state-of-the-art surgery and, ultimately, housing. In another instance, Tom was able to gain the confidence of a man who was living in a park and had extensive "trust" issues. Tom was able to convince him to start visiting the clinic for medical needs and, at the same time, built a level of trust that enabled the patient to receive permanent housing. After 15 years of homelessness, this patient now has a stable roof over his head.

Many of Tom's heroic acts are discovered through his patients' grateful testimonies. Tom keeps in touch with his patients long after their medical conditions are stable. He can be seen riding his motorcycle to Belle Glade on his days off to check in on them. In his 11 years working in community health centers, he's known for providing "Tom's Box," where he stores extra clothes, shoes and canned food for homeless patients. In Tom's words, "Service is my reward."

◀ Tom Walczak takes the temperature of a patient at the C. L. Brumback Primary Care Clinic at the Senator Philip D. Lewis Center.

The Palm Beach Post has teamed with Palm Healthcare Foundation, Tenet Health and VITAS Healthcare to salute nurses. Go to ThankANurseToday.com to read more.

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Healthcare

This advertorial recognizing Tom Walczak ran in The Palm Beach Post during National Nurses Week. Enlarge advertorial.

What is a HOT Team?

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Through Palm Beach County's Homeless Services Division, there are



several types of outreach to this population.

Housing Focused Outreach Teams – Two teams work with a caseload of the most vulnerable homeless individuals – engaging in regular housing focused discussion and activities, taking them to see housing alternatives and place in housing.

HOT team – One team conducts targeted outreaches throughout Palm Beach County, focusing on areas of high concentration of homeless individuals. They will also respond to community requests.

Articles Of Interest

Daniel Scott, VP & Chief Information Officer

Darcy J. Davis, Chief Executive Officer

Roger Chen

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