



# Homeless Healthcare in England - How the Experience of Homelessness Makes a Difference

By **Mark Leonard**, *Homeless Health Case Worker, Groundswell*

Poor health and the experience of homelessness go hand in hand. In 2018 two people experiencing homelessness died every single day in England and Wales,<sup>1</sup> and nearly one third of these deaths were caused by treatable conditions.<sup>2</sup> In my job as Homeless Health Case Worker at Groundswell, I see the people behind these numbers and the social factors that are a barrier to accessing and benefitting from healthcare. We support people to get their health problems addressed and under control, to help people on their journey out of homelessness, but it's not easy. For example, if you're rough sleeping, finding a safe spot to sleep is usually a higher priority than going to see a doctor. Using drugs and alcohol is frowned upon by society but often used to relieve the anxiety and difficulties of rough sleeping; however, this is another barrier to accessing healthcare. It is still complicated for those sofa surfing or living in hostels – with delays in benefit payments causing stress or an untreated leg ulcer physically stopping someone from being able to walk. These are all reasons why someone might not be addressing their health issues.

One of the biggest problems in England when you are homeless is registering with a doctor.<sup>3</sup> Groundswell's peer research 'More than a Statistic'<sup>4</sup> found that often people are turned away because they don't have a proof of address or identification, although this is against NHS guidelines.<sup>5</sup> In response, Groundswell produced small 'My Right to Healthcare' cards<sup>6</sup> that people show the receptionist when registering with a doctor. The cards state:

- You do not need a fixed address.
- You do not need identification.
- Your immigration status does not matter.

Over the past three years Groundswell have distributed over 80,000 cards in London to make sure people are aware of their rights and have access to the healthcare they need. As a result of this research and the solution, that was led by people who have been homeless, NHS England are planning to roll these cards out across the country. This is a huge opportunity to overcome a big barrier in homeless people addressing their health problems.

Groundswell is a homelessness charity specialising in healthcare – both physical and mental. The charity's vision is of an equal and inclusive society, where the solutions to homelessness come from the experience of people who are, or have been, homeless. My

journey with Groundswell started nearly two years ago, when I was slowly getting my life back on track and staying off the alcohol, but it was tough as I was living in a wet hostel, I knew it could lead me back to drinking. My keyworker suggested I started volunteering, so I went for the interview with Groundswell to join the Homeless Health Peer Advocacy (HHPA) training programme.

I started the six-week programme in early 2018, which covered everything from advocacy to boundaries to managing challenging behaviour. I have only good memories of the HHPA training. One of the best parts of the training was about empowerment, I think this is the most important part of what we do. The training kept me focused and driven towards what I wanted to achieve; ultimately being a paid worker in the homelessness sector, which I have been since August this year. Once we had finished the training, we shadowed experienced volunteers or workers, giving us a chance to see the challenges we, and our clients, may face. Once we graduated – a celebration with colleagues, family, friends and partner organisations – we began our role as volunteer Peer Advocates.

Groundswell is unique – we focus solely on healthcare, physical and mental. But also, because all volunteers and two thirds of all staff have lived experience of homelessness, from rough sleeping to living in a hostel setting. I feel that my shared experience of homelessness makes a difference, I can empathise with my clients which puts them at ease, making it easier to support them.

HHPA has two main parts:

1. One to one peer advocacy – engagements with individuals experiencing homelessness; building relationships to support them to attend health appointments and engage with health services; providing practical support such as travel fares, telephone reminders and accompaniment to appointments. In addition, we focus on building the skills and confidence to enable clients to access health services independently in the future.
2. Health Promotion In-Reach – we facilitate regular events at homelessness services to engage their service users. Activities include building relationships with potential new clients, raising awareness of specific health issues and bringing in health professionals.

1 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2018>

2 <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-03-11/homelessness-kills>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/02/homeless-people-60-times-more-likely-visit-ae-study>

4 <https://www.healthylondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/More-than-a-statistic.pdf>

5 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/primary-medical-care-policy-and-guidance-manual-pgm/>

6 <https://groundswell.org.uk/what-we-do/healthandhomelessness/my-right-to-healthcare-cards/>



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After I graduated, I volunteered a few times a week as a Peer Advocate for around eighteen months. Groundswell really values the lived experience of homelessness, but this often means volunteers and staff can have difficult backgrounds or situations. We have a fantastic Progression Manager who is always there to support people from the minute they start on the HHPA training. This support ranges from helping with benefit enquiries, housing issues, CV writing or applying for training or education courses. During my time volunteering I was fortunate to be supported by the Progression Manager, gaining experience and building my confidence which prepared me to apply for paid jobs. I was over the moon to be offered a job working for Groundswell. I now work across several of Groundswell’s homeless health projects in London.

On Mondays I work with the Pathways team at Kings College Hospital<sup>7</sup> with patients who are homeless. I introduce myself to patients and explain how we can offer support to them as they leave hospital so they continue to manage their health. This may be supporting them to register with a Doctor, attend a hospital outpatient appointment or follow up for wound dressings. It can be upsetting for anyone in hospital, I try to brighten up their day – a piece of cake and a coffee sometimes just makes them a little better and it helps our relationship.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I work with the Find and Treat team at University College London Hospital on our joint Hepatitis C project. People who are, or have

been homeless, have a much higher chance of being impacted by Hepatitis C. Risk factors for Hepatitis C are often associated with homelessness in relation to a history of injecting drugs combined with a chaotic and unstable lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> I work closely with healthcare providers and homelessness services finding and testing people for the virus. A lot of this involves building close relationships with professionals and clients. I have been trained to do mouth swabs and dry blood spot testing. Recently our team has been focusing on those with multiple complex needs, who may have been diagnosed with Hepatitis C but failed to engage with and complete the treatment. A lot of my job involves locating these people and offering support, emotional and practical, to begin treatment again.

As HHPA grows across London, as well as in other UK cities through our national #HealthNow partnership,<sup>9</sup> I also support volunteer recruitment. I ring around local homelessness services to talk with staff focusing on employment, training, and education to promote the HHPA training and volunteering opportunity for their clients. I feel like it is important that more people know about volunteering at Groundswell, so they can receive the same opportunity that I have. From the day I joined Groundswell as a trainee Peer Advocate I knew I could go to anyone – staff or volunteers. Everyone has time to listen and time for a chat. I’m proud to work for Groundswell and be part of a team that really does change lives.

7 <https://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/our-services/homeless-team/overview.aspx>

8 <https://groundswell.org.uk/what-we-do/healthandhomelessness/hepatitis-c/>

9 <https://groundswell.org.uk/healthnow/>