

Making a difference for the underserved

BY J. MILES LAYTON

The Dominion Post

Pranav Patel is trying to make a difference by helping the homeless.

As a member of the Multidisciplinary UnSheltered Homeless Relief Outreach Of Morgantown, Patel and his classmates, a few physicians and a social worker seek out the homeless to provide basic clothing items, deliver food and social interaction.

They also make medical assessments and treat people with first aid, because many of the people they are helping have not seen a doctor in years.

"There was a man with liver disease," Patel said. "It shocked me because I never thought such bad cases could exist without treatment. No one had caught this before."

Patel, 23, a second-year student at the WVU School of Medicine, said the man was sent immediately to the hospital for treatment, but things might have been different if no one had offered to help.

"We are definitely making a difference," Patel said. "Without the MUSHROOM, I think that man might have died."

Patel said he has seen untreated diseases as well as common ailments that require first aid.

"I've gotten firsthand experience of things that we have learned about in medical school," Patel said.

MUSHROOM refers many people to Milan Puskar Health Right, a health clinic that helps low-income and uninsured people. Laura Jones, executive director of Health Right, said the MUSHROOM Project is a link between the homeless and agencies that want to help.

When MUSHROOM members give out sandwiches, or something as simple as a toothbrush, Jones said, they create the trust necessary

to help these people get the care they need.

"The people at MUSHROOM go out and create trust with people that no longer trust the system," she said.

The MUSHROOM refers people to Bartlett House, a homeless shelter in Morgantown. Brent McCue, program manager for Bartlett House, said the exact number of people who are homeless in Monongalia County is hard to determine, but Bartlett House routinely has at least 70 people sleeping in its 80-bed facility. McCue said it is sad knowing some of the problems facing the homeless population, such as substance abuse and mental illness, make it hard to help.

"There are some clients that don't seem to be reachable," McCue said. Mike Petrosky, 25, a second-year student at the WVU School of Medicine, said he learned a lot by helping the homeless as a member of MUSHROOM.

"Homelessness can happen to anyone," he said. "If one little thing goes wrong, a car breaks down or a hospital bill. I don't think a lot of people see that."

Petrosky said it is hard for people to break out of the cycle with low-paying jobs and the high cost of living in the area.

"Even if they are working, and trying to be productive, it's a long haul," he said.

Petrosky said it was sad seeing a young mother and a little girl who were homeless. But there are success stories. Petrosky said the MUSHROOM helped a man who was living under a bridge find an apartment and a job as a custodial worker.

Patel said homelessness is also caused by medical conditions such as substance abuse and even domestic violence.

"This has definitely given me a new perspective on life," he said.