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Waltham resident, retired hospital executive, aids homeless

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Daggett, a 76-year-old retired hospital executive, is a volunteer with Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP), a nonprofit delivering healthcare to more than 12,000 homeless men, women and children a year at 70 shelters and other sites. For two years, Daggett has volunteered in the "footroom" of BHCHP's medical clinic housed at St. Francis House, a day shelter that is a stone's throw from the Boston Common.

On a recent afternoon, Daggett and another footroom volunteer welcome patients as they enter the clinic room and sit on one of its three chairs. He asks a few questions – are they feeling OK? Do they smoke? Have any allergies? Are they diabetic? Are they up-to-date on their immunizations? Then he briefly examines their feet.

If he sees anything troubling, he'll call in a nurse for a closer examination. Finally, he places a pink basin of warm water with a bit of soap at their feet and for the next 15 minutes or so, they relax as their feet soak. Everyone leaves the footroom with a new pair of white athletic socks.

"For those 15, 20 or 30 minutes patients are in the footroom, someone is paying attention to them, not just to their feet, but to them as a human being," says Daggett, who learned about BHCHP through his Catholic parish in Newton. To see them smile, or say 'thank you so much' or 'God bless,' is just a reward in itself."

Rain-soaked feet, ill-fitting shoes, constant standing and diseases like diabetes take their toll on the feet of homeless people. But the importance of the footroom goes far beyond feet: it is one of the nonprofit's most effective tools for bringing reluctant patients into its network of services.

"For a homeless person, building a trusting relationship with a health care provider can be very difficult," says Jessie Gaeta, BHCHP's medical director. "Visiting the footroom allows patients to form an informal relationship with nurses and doctors gradually. As feet are tended to, trusting relationships are slowly built."

Daggett admits that before he began volunteering with BHCHP, he was not only uncomfortable around homeless people, but also under the misperception that their situation was solely their own fault.

"I didn't understand the complex causes of homelessness and that many people end up where they are due to forces beyond their control."

He sought out the position at the footroom to get out of his "comfort zone," as he terms it.

And as a former hospital administrator who has witnessed how much money urban hospitals spend on emergency services for poor or uninsured patients, Daggett appreciates the savings BHCHP delivers by providing primary care and keeping people out of emergency rooms.

"BHCHP and the footroom are terrific," says Daggett. "They're not just caring for the feet. They're caring for the whole person in a holistic way."

The footroom badly needs new men's shoes, boots and sneakers. To donate, call 617-542-4704. For more information about Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, visit www.bhchp.org.

– Vicki Ritterband, media coordinator, Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program



Richard Daggett, in Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program's footroom, tends to feet of the homeless every Monday afternoon. COURTESY PHOTO

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