Potential Service Learning/Capstone Experience Opportunity

**Organization name:** Visiting Nurse Association (VNA)

**Organization website:** theVNAcares.org

**Organization brief description:** VNA has been providing care in the Omaha community since 1896, and serves approximately 50,000 men, women, and children each year. Services include home health care, non-medical home care, palliative care, hospice, school health services, financial assistance for breast cancer patients, nutrition education for low-income families, home visitation programs for at-risk families, home visits to high-risk mothers and newborns, and nursing care in all area homeless shelters and to youth living on the street. VNA also serves as the Health Department of Pottawattamie County, and in 2012 merged with Easter Seals Nebraska to become the largest provider of disability services in the state of Nebraska. VNA provides care wherever people call home and regardless of complexity of care or ability to pay.

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**Description of identified needs and proposed activities:**

1) **Palliative Care**

In 2010, under the direction of medical director Dr. Todd Sauer, VNA launched a community-driven, patient-focused palliative care program in the Omaha community. VNA’s palliative care model is similar to a hospice model in that patients experience positive outcomes related to symptom management, including increased pain management, and decreased acute care stays. The difference is that, unlike hospice, patients do not need to forego treatment, and it is not required that their life expectancy be six months or less.

VNA, Nebraska Medicine, Methodist Health Systems, and private philanthropists are working together to meet new ACA mandates, decrease rehospitalizations, encourage better utilization of hospice benefits when appropriate, lower patient pain levels, and increase quality of life and patient satisfaction.

In helping us reach these goals, a student will:

- Assist in the development of policies supporting these efforts;
- Assist in efforts to link qualified patients to palliative care services;
- Formulate and implement an effective evaluation of program effectiveness, cost efficiencies and savings across the sectors, accessibility, quality, and outcomes.

2) **Breast Cancer Patient Assistance Program**

Through a partnership with the Susan G. Komen Nebraska affiliate, in 2010 VNA launched the Breast Cancer Patient Assistance Program (BCPAP). Over the years, additional funders including Project Pink’d, Every Woman Matters Foundation, Centers for Disease Control, and numerous private donors, have joined with us to ensure fulfillment of the program’s simple mission: to provide short-term financial assistance to individuals experiencing financial hardship.

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as a result of a breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. VNA’s Bachelor-prepared social worker, Cindy Calhoun, works closely with each patient to assess current and upcoming needs, and provide financial assistance which will make the most significant impact. This assistance can range from day-to-day needs such as help with food, gas to get to and from treatment, childcare while in treatment, rent, utilities, etc.

The ultimate goal of this program is to reduce or even eliminate increased financial burdens and stress to patients, allowing them to focus on what matters most – healing and recovery. VNA was ahead of the curve in recognizing what is now being referred to as “financial toxicity” by oncology academics. Financial toxicity refers to the way out-of-pocket expenses can drain the wallets of cancer patients, poison quality of life and, in fact, become an adverse event of treatment. VNA works closely with patients, physicians’ offices, support groups, and oncology social workers throughout Nebraska to ensure patients are aware of and able to access this program.

A student will:

- Assist in promotion of this program throughout the state;
- Assist in the implementation of VNA’s “One Month. One Mission.” in October, 2015 – a statewide fundraising event;
- Develop and carry out a retrospective research project assessing long-term impacts on patient quality of life, ability to comply with treatment, and treatment outcomes;
- Develop and implement evaluation measures assessing short-term impacts on patient quality of life and ability to comply with treatment.

3) Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. With the May 2013 publication of the DSM-5 diagnostic manual, all autism disorders were merged from their previously recognized subtypes into one umbrella diagnosis of ASD. ASD can be associated with intellectual disability, ability to effectively communicate, sensory difficulties, difficulties in motor coordination and attention, and physical health issues such as sleep and gastrointestinal disturbances.

While the prevalence of ASD has increased substantially in the last 40 years, so has understanding of causes and treatment. One of the most well-studied and promising treatments for ASD is Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention, utilizing Applied Behavior Analysis. Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) is the only therapy to have been approved by the United States Surgeon General’s office for the treatment of autism, and has gained an international reputation as the single most effective science-based strategy for teaching children with serious behavioral and cognitive disorders resulting from ASD. EIBI offers children an opportunity to acquire complex functional skills while improving areas of deficiency. This early access to intervention is critical to the development of social skills and a child’s ability to integrate with society.

VNA and its sister organization, Easter Seals Nebraska, are researching the need for intensive and specialized in-home treatment for children with ASD, who have special health care needs, or who are at risk for chronic, developmental, or behavioral conditions.

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A student will:

- In partnership with VNA/Easter Seals Nebraska, along with other service providers and philanthropists, develop and assist in the oversight of a community needs assessment.

4) Telehealth Monitoring Services

VNA continues to be at the forefront of technology and innovation, with over a decade of experience providing telehealth programs. Telehealth services promise cost savings to Medicare, Medicaid, and consumers, as well as cost savings to the organization; support better management of chronic diseases; reduce acute care episodes among the highest risk patients; improve the quality of life of fragile patients and their families; and in some cases, save lives.

A student will:

- Evaluate the cost savings of VNA’s telehealth programs to VNA, Medicare, Medicaid, and consumers;
- Evaluate short- and long-term patient outcomes related to use of telehealth services;
- Evaluate and compare the value of telehealth services, both positive and negative, in Nebraska and Iowa state reimbursement models to other states which support and reimburse for these services.

Timeframe of proposed activities to begin:
Fall 2015, Spring 2016, Summer 2016; opportunities are offered on an ongoing basis

Benefit of proposed activities to organization:
All identified activities support the mission of VNA and will allow us to better assess the viability of these programs and services, demonstrate cost-effectiveness, and evaluate patient outcomes to continue or shift course as needed.

Benefit of proposed activities to the student:
Students will be introduced to the inner workings of a 119-year old organization which provides care and support to approximately 50,000 of the community’s most fragile individuals and families. VNA subscribes to a culture of collaboration and teamwork at all levels, and students can expect to be welcomed into the family and given the resources necessary to be successful. Students will have access to a wealth of expertise at VNA – at every level and in nearly any subject matter – and have the opportunity to acquire skills related to nonprofit leadership, community engagement, relationship management, presentation skills, legislative advocacy, marketing, philanthropy, social media, research and evaluation, individual home health care and requirements, community health efforts, and much more.

Skill sets of students requested, including possible MPH concentration desired:
Leadership, organization, relationship management, evaluation and research, writing. Students MUST have a passion for ensuring access to care for vulnerable community members and a spirit of professionalism as a representative of VNA and our work in the community.

Most MPH concentrations could be a good fit for the identified needs.

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Additional Information:
Please visit our website at www.theVNAcares.org to learn more about us. We are also open to students whose interests align with the mission of VNA, but who have a particular interest which falls outside what is outlined above. For instance, we serve as the public health department of Pottawattamie county, IA, and also have a number of other programs including: prenatal visits to at-risk mothers; home visitation/parenting programs; nutrition education for low-income families; home health care; shelter nursing care in all area homeless and domestic violence shelters, as well as to unattended youth living on the street; disability services; etc. The VNA is located on 12565 West Center Road, Suite 100, Omaha, Nebraska.

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