

The Social Function of Community Health Centers

By Sebastian de Assis, Communications and Development Director, Northwest Human Services

Editor's Notes:

The following story highlights the value of Community Health Centers in general and one local FQHC specifically. Although the services of one local clinic are highlighted in this article, the Medical Society recognizes there are many others in our community who serve the healthcare needs of this same portion of our population to include: Salud Medical Center; Willamette Family Medical Center; individual physicians; and community free clinics organized by local citizens and churches.

Any clinics, physicians or organizations that provide healthcare services to the underserved of our communities are invited to share their stories by submitting them to the Medical Society for publication in ChartNotes®.

From the limited perspective of healing and disease prevention, health care is but a professional practice. When perceived within a broad social context, it assumes a more comprehensive meaning that expands beyond its pragmatic function.

The national crisis afflicting the health care system in the United States, which has been exacerbated by the current economic downturn, has turned health care into a central political issue. Indeed, when dozens of millions of our fellow-citizens do not have access to basic health care, the national crisis has long branched out of the medical arena and become a veritable sociological calamity. It can no longer be classified exclusively as a crisis in the health care system, for it has economic, political and social repercussions of harrowing consequences to the welfare of the nation and its citizens.

In the meantime, while the debate on how to revamp the national health care system continues unabated, Community Health Centers have been delivering quality health care services to the medically underserved for over 40 years. According to the White House Office of Management and Budget, Community Health Centers save the

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health care system up to \$17.6 billion a year and is considered one of the most effective federal programs. In addition, a study by the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) revealed that their overall economic impact reaches up to \$12.6 billion and create approximately 143,000 jobs in some of the country's most economically deprived areas. Thus, every dollar spent in support of Community Health Centers reduces health disparities and cost while stimulating local economies—it is a medical, financial, and social investment in the community.

There is enough documented evidence to indicate that Community Health Centers have successfully combined the sociological and the pragmatic function of medical practice. Let's take one example to illustrate this reasoning.

Northwest Human Services, a non-

profit agency committed to serving the needs of the community through comprehensive medical care, mental health, and social services, has been an invaluable safety-net since 1970. With two Federally Qualified Health Centers, a mental health clinic, a dental facility, and three social services programs that attend to the needs of the most vulnerable citizens in a five-county region, the organization is a paragon of an all-inclusive model of health care. In fact, the agency was born out of the espousing of medical services and social responsibility.

In the summer of 1970, two UCLA medical students arrived for an internship with Marion County Health Department. Shortly after arriving, they were appalled with the neglected medical and social conditions of the homeless and low-income populations in Salem and were determined to make a positive difference. Imbued

with the characteristic idealism of the youth of that era, medical students Phil Yule and Paul Kaplan decided to establish a free clinic to serve disadvantaged citizens. Thus, with the blessings of Marion County Health Department, they opened the *Cry of Love Free Clinic*. Nine years later the free clinic had grown into the West Bank Health Network, and in 1982 it became Northwest Human Services; an agency providing comprehensive health care and social services to nearly 100,000 underprivileged individuals and families each year.

Today, Northwest Human Services continues its leading-edge approach to expanding and improving delivery of health care, while aware of its social responsibility toward individual citizens and the community at large. Like the founders of the organization, its current staff and health care providers are steadfastly committed to

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media, she needed to help a lot of people to pull herself out of the pit. For the last 15 years she has been active in charities that have helped hundreds of thousands of imperiled children around the world. She has faced off against Eastern European despots and the Taliban. Not only does she put her money to work, she goes to the most unglamorous locations to deliver hands-on care, even without cameras snapping.

Duchess of York. "On the day my best friend died of melanoma, she said to me, 'Fergie, remember there's not enough kindness in the world.' And that's so true," she says.

Why, one might ask, would someone used to royal hob-nobbing and saving Romanian AIDS orphans travel half way around the world to spend a day in the mid-Valley? The Duchess would tell you it's because she believes in programs like MedAssist and Project Access, the beneficiaries of the Foundation's April event. Gratification for an extrovert like Sarah Ferguson, who has risen above her own adversity, comes from helping the people of Marion and Polk Counties

show generosity and consideration for neighbors facing misfortune.

Besides, she got to tease Ron and Bud. Who wouldn't fly across eight time zones for that? ☺

kind-ness
noun
: the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate.
: a kind act; *it is a kindness I shall never forget*

The words *kind* and *kindness* come up often in a conversation with the

For more information about Project Access, the newest initiative of the Medical Foundation of Marion & Polk Counties, please contact **Barbara Halsey** at barbprojectaccess@live.com or 503-561-6074.

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serving the needs of those who would otherwise not have access to health care. Hence, in order to recruit and retain high caliber professionals who are attuned with the agency's mission, Northwest Human Services offers an excellent benefit package and competitive wages to its workforce. These

top-notch professionals are the reason the organization has been thriving for almost 39 years.

As the national health care system crisis endures, Community Health Centers continue assuaging the problem by providing quality health care to millions of disenfranchised citizens in all 50 states and territories of the United States.

Let there be no doubt that in the ongoing debate about a feasible solution for the health care system

crisis, which has turned into a socio-economic and political crisis in itself, there is much to be learned from the Community Health Center experience.

At a time when technological advancements proceed unceasingly, the ensuing social transformations have been astounding. In the midst of this whirlwind of change, the health care system in the United States has been resisting to adapt to its new sociological function that is fraught with social responsibility. Indeed, it has become a socio-economic and political agenda item that requires immediate attention. ☺

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