

Business Unusual

by Ken Garber

Allina, winner of the 1998 McGaw Prize, is pioneering a new treatment: boosting health at the grassroots

For 15 years, ER nurse Polly Groshens did what she was trained to do for battered women. "Basically, we just took care of their injuries," she says. "We might see the same person again and again. Most of the time we never asked, 'Do you have a safe place to go?'"

But the basics now go much further at United Hospital in St. Paul, Minn., where Groshens works. In the ER, birth center, and clinics, staffers are trained to spot victims of domestic violence. Their routine includes a simple question: Is anyone bothering you physically or emotionally at home? Already the screening has paid big dividends. In the first nine months of 1997, the hospital referred fewer than 10 domestic violence victims to shelters and other agencies. Over the next 12 months, referrals jumped to 228.

The change--carried out with a local group called Partners for Violence Prevention--is a small but important part of a statewide campaign against violence by United's parent organization, Allina Health System of suburban Minnetonka. The campaign and others like it have earned Allina the 1998 Foster G. McGaw Prize for community service, a \$75,000 award sponsored by the Baxter Allegiance Foundation, Deerfield, Ill., and the American Hospital Association. "You can't have healthy communities," says Allina CEO Gordon Sprenger, "when people feel insecure and afraid."

But stopping violence is only a piece of Allina's work to make its communities healthier. The system also is helping build housing and train the unemployed. "Not many are trying to do this stuff," says Mike Christenson, Allina's vice-president for community investment. "Some people roll their eyes and think we're crazy because of the breadth of experiments under way. But we're trying to change the environment--a very unusual thing for a health system to do."

Allina and predecessors HealthSpan and Medica, which merged in 1994, didn't always take such a broad view--not even a decade ago, when Sprenger ran Abbott Northwestern Hospital in south Minneapolis. "We used to have kids come into the ER with rat bites," he recalls. Once the wounds were dressed, staffers felt they'd done their job. "We never thought of the rat-infested houses the kids were going back into."

But a walk in a nearby park changed that. Out for a stroll one day, Sprenger talked to a woman who'd brought her child to play. When

he asked if the woman had heard about the hospital's vaccination program, she said she worried more about kids getting gunned down in the playground. "That's when I started thinking of what we could do to address violence and crime."

In 1996, Sprenger and Honeywell CEO Michael Bonsignore approached the mayor of Minneapolis and a county commissioner with their concerns about poverty and crime in Abbott Northwestern's neighborhood. Out of that meeting came the joint business-government Phillips Partnership, whose members pledged to raise \$25 million to improve the area.

The partnership first tackled joblessness. A local grassroots organization, Project for Pride in Living, offered to train the unemployed if Allina promised to hire them at Abbott Northwestern and Children's hospitals. The two facilities, both understaffed, quickly agreed. Since then, 106 Phillips residents have graduated from Train to Work, and 63 are still on the job. The program ultimately aims to fill 150 positions.

Next on the partnership's agenda was crime. Stepped-up police patrols and coordination with private security guards last year helped cut neighborhood crime by 23 percent. Sending probation officers on patrol with police also helped yank more parole violators off the streets.

Housing, though, is the partnership's biggest undertaking. Three projects are transforming 14 blighted blocks. In all, 193 rental and owner-occupied homes will be built or renovated in the next few years. Services are also getting a boost. It doesn't make much sense, says Sprenger, to urge diabetics to eat more fruits and vegetables if they have nowhere to buy them. "For 50,000 people in south Minneapolis," he says, "there isn't anything but a convenience store."

Allina's support of the Phillips Partnership and other projects comes through the Allina Foundation, which spends \$2 million to \$4 million a year on community betterment. "There are good business reasons for what we do," says Sprenger, "as well as good social policy."

Taking the long view has led Allina in unusual directions. In 1996, state legislation to restrict the sale of tobacco was languishing when the health system decided to get involved. "Allina provided the lobbying muscle and brought in other health care organizations," says Joe Loveland, Allina's media services director and former communications chief for the Minnesota attorney general. The bill eventually passed.

Allina also has taken a lead in the statewide antiviolence drive. "We're treating violence as a clinical problem," says Medica president David Strand, who also chairs Minnesota's Health Care Coalition on Violence. The group has crafted guidelines to help spot people at risk for violence, and health care organizations are putting them in place.

The coalition also has coaxed Minnesota hospitals into collecting "E-codes," which identify the causes of injuries.

Allina takes on projects with clearly defined goals, such as Day One. The name refers to the first day a domestic abuse victim enters the health care or social service system. Because an alarming number of women had trouble finding room at shelters, Allina and the United Way worked to streamline the process. Now, instead of having to phone a dozen shelters before finding one with a vacancy, the victim makes a single call--and is almost sure to find a haven. "If one shelter is full, we hook her up on a conference call with a shelter that does have space," says Colleen Schmitt, a manager at the Alexandra House shelter in Blaine. A new computer system will further speed the process.

Once started, some Allina projects have had surprising side effects. Take United Hospital's domestic violence work. At nearly every staff-training session, someone comes forward to reveal a personal history of abuse. That's a big deal for Allina, says Andrea Marboe, program manager of Partners for Violence Prevention. "We have 22,000 employees, and 17,000 of them are women. A secondary outcome is that we're able to support our own employees."

That's not to say there aren't frustrations. Health systems can do only so much, and while civic-minded institutions may invest time, staff, and money, the cycle of violence can be broken only by people determined to make a better life for themselves and their families. "We can tell people to get help--we can tell people we're concerned about them," says United's Groshens. "The next step is up to them."

Marboe agrees. "With domestic violence, they keep coming. As a clinical provider, you can't fix it. The training is: Do what you can do, and then let go." But she's watched as Allina's work has led even competitors to join hands and deal with community problems. Regions Hospital, part of rival Minneapolis network HealthPartners, now performs specialized evidentiary lab work for sexual assault victims seen at United--at cost.

"For your competitor hospital to provide lab services for your patients is a breakthrough," says Marboe. "We're changing the way things are done."

Ken Garber is a writer in Ann Arbor, Mich.

The Foster G. McGaw Prize for Excellence in Community Service draws 120 to 150 entries each year. For the 1998 award, 131 were received from 36 states and Puerto Rico, including applications from 57 health systems, 11 integrated networks, 49 hospitals, and seven community partnerships. Finalists, each receiving a \$10,000 cash award, were:

- Franklin Community Health Network, Farmington, Maine
- INTEGRIS *Health*, Oklahoma City, Okla.
- Southern Illinois Healthcare Foundation, Centreville

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