

Connecting to the Community

Sponsor: Crozer-Keystone Health System

Location: Chester, PA

In its heyday, Chester, Pa., was part of the industrial backbone of America. Its factories hummed and it had a rock-solid economy, but that was decades ago. Caught in the Rust Belt, the city "fell on hard times and its economic viability went downhill over 20 to 30 years. It was an insidious process," says Edward Baum, vice president of community health at Crozer-Keystone Health System, headquartered in nearby Springfield.

By 1995, Chester held the dubious distinction of being a state-declared distressed municipality. Its generally older, poorer, less-educated citizens also had higher rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes and received fewer primary care services than other Delaware County residents. With two hospitals in town, Crozer-Keystone was Chester's major employer and had a generations-long history of community involvement. As Chester slid, the system added more health outreach programs, but eventually realized it was "putting Band-Aids on major problems," Baum says. "We were reacting to health care needs, but not helping the community get ahead. We knew if we were going to turn around health indicators, we needed to look at the root causes."

The system responded with Community Connections, a mosaic of health, economic and social programs and services developed in partnership with 20 other organizations and governmental agencies. Health-related components include several collaborations with the local school district and involvement with the city's only federally qualified community health center. A joint venture between Crozer-Keystone and Widener University lured other employers to Chester. The two not-for-profits developed a business incubator facility, now completely occupied with high-tech firms. A second building is due to open this summer, and a third is planned. An acute care hospital converted to an ambulatory care facility made it easier for the needy to access services. Crozer-Keystone reserved about one-third of the facility for community organizations, and the resulting One Stop Shop is home to more than 20 social and health agencies.

The efforts have had a major stabilizing impact on Chester, and improved health outcomes for residents. Mortality rates and chronic disease risk factors, though still higher than surrounding areas, are narrowing. Once an abysmal 36 percent, immunization rates are now a near-perfect 99.85 percent, and the teen pregnancy rate is down to 31 per 1,000 from 43.5 per 1,000. Crozer-Keystone president Gerald Miller is quick to share credit. "We're the glue that holds it together, but we couldn't have done it without our partners."

THE PROBLEM: The health status of Chester residents was inextricably tied to the city's economic woes.

THE PLAYERS: Crozer-Keystone Health System and 20 community organizations and governmental agencies.

THE PLAN: Create a mosaic of health, social and economic initiatives to bolster both the economy and health of Chester residents.

THE RESULTS: A more stabilized community, declining mortality rates and chronic disease risk factors.

Caption

Edward Baum, vice president of community health at Crozer-Keystone Health System, says, "We knew if we were going to turn around health indicators, we needed to look at the root causes."

*Published by Hospitals & Health Networks Magazine
2002 NOVA Award Winners - July 2002*