

Helping a Community Help Itself

Sponsor: Mercy Medical Center

Location: Canton, OH

Miss Betty is more than a grandmother. She is a prototype for community empowerment. For years, the other tenants in her building, one of 37 that make up Skyline Terrace, a subsidized housing community, came to Miss Betty for advice on raising babies or cooking a meatloaf. Her apartment was a meeting place for neighbors with health concerns or those who needed to make a phone call--she had the only telephone in the building. If people needed anything, they invariably turned to her. When Mercy Medical Center undertook an effort to restore a sense of ownership to the community, long beset by crime and drug problems, it, too, turned to Miss Betty.

"People were afraid to trust anyone," says Karen Feller, a leader of the effort. "Our first hurdle was to find people to work with us and break down those walls." Feller and Susan Ross, coordinator of Students Against a Violent Environment, a program of Canton City Schools, set about finding a few more Miss Bettys among the Skyline tenants. They found five residents to serve as coordinators for Project CARE (a Creative Approach to Resident Empowerment), established four years ago by Mercy and the local school system to improve the health and safety of Skyline residents. The coordinators are trained to read temperatures, administer CPR and take blood pressure, among other tasks. Coordinators, who receive six weeks of training, meet for monthly updates on techniques and new health concerns, and are given "wellness kits" with whatever equipment they need to do the job.

Currently, 174 residents have access to coordinators in 13 buildings at Skyline. "Our ultimate goal is to have a coordinator in each of the 37 buildings," says Feller, Project CARE coordinator. Coordinators are also trained in anger management to handle disputes. In return, they receive \$25 off their monthly rent. In all, the program will cost \$9,000 to operate over the next two years.

"It's cheap and it's replicable," Feller says. "Anybody can pick up on this concept and develop it." More importantly, she adds, "It's neat to see people come out of their shells and recognize themselves as part of the solution."

The Problem: Mercy Medical Center had no way of reaching residents of low-income housing who had health concerns.

The Players: Mercy Medical Center; volunteer residents of Skyline Terrace; and Canton City Schools.

The Plan: Find residents who can engage the population; train them in providing basic health assistance and education such as first aid and CPR; and expand the program throughout the complex.

The Results: Volunteers trained for 13 buildings; goal is to recruit volunteers for all 37 buildings in the Skyline complex.

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