

## Taking Health Care on the Road to Those in Need

Sponsor: St. Vincent Health System

Location: Jacksonville, FL

The migrant and seasonal farm workers in seven northeastern Florida counties are among the poorest and most vulnerable of any group in the United States. Laboring hard for very low wages, they face innumerable challenges and barriers to health care. The nature of their work, financial and transportation issues and, for many, language barriers and distrust of the system keep them in precarious health. Against the odds, more than 25,000 have received both primary and specialty care over the past 11 years thanks to the Mobile Health Outreach Ministry of St. Vincent Health System, Jacksonville, Fla.

MHOM began on a small scale: the interests of a St. Vincent-affiliated nun coincided with the system's desire to find other uses for a wellness van it already owned. Initially operating for just a few hours each week, MHOM distinguished itself among both farm workers and state and county health officials by identifying a tuberculosis outbreak. "That established our reputation and reliability," says Mary Alice Phelan, director of community relations at St. Vincent. Collaboration with the counties to squelch the outbreak led to substantive, enduring relationships. Now, MHOM underwrites portions of the salaries of county nurses, caseworkers, interpreters and physicians who accompany MHOM staff on field trips that may cover several counties and last up to 18 hours.

When possible, the van parks on or adjacent to farm properties. Otherwise, MHOM uses public land and shuttles workers between the van and their work sites. Over the years, two more vans have been donated and MHOM has increased to 32 hours of care each week. Success with the farm workers prompted St. Vincent to see how MHOM could benefit others. In 1997, it began the Urban Health Program, which takes MHOM to the inner city of Jacksonville. For 20 hours a week, MHOM staff and county health department employees see the city's homeless, uninsured working poor and other medically underserved residents, including children from disadvantaged homes.

From performing Pap smears and arranging specialty care to supplying free prescriptions and helping diabetics better manage their disease, MHOM has made all the difference to its patients. "These are people who simply wouldn't have had health care otherwise," Phelan says. Yet patient care isn't the only positive result of MHOM, says John Maher, president and chief executive officer of St. Vincent. "The people who work in it are so excited and enthusiastic, it impacts the entire culture of St. Vincent," he says. "We use it as a model to catalyze and focus on people who are underserved."

**THE PROBLEM:** Farm workers and impoverished residents of Jacksonville have limited access to health care.

**THE PLAYERS:** St. Vincent Health System, health departments from seven Florida counties, the Duval County school system and numerous social service organizations.

**THE PLAN:** Take health care to those in need.

**THE RESULTS:** In two years, 7,751 patients seen, 1,303 physicals and 687 immunizations given to school-age children.

**Caption**

Mary Alice Phelan, program director for the Mobile Health Outreach Ministry at St. Vincent's, visits the "ferneries" outside of Jacksonville where a large migrant population does seasonal work at the fields there.

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