



The 2012 Foster G. McGaw Prize for Excellence in Community Service

Winner: St. Joseph's/Candler Health System, Savannah, Ga.





A Winning Formula for Community Health

St. Joseph's/Candler takes the **Foster G. McGaw Prize** for its holistic approach to improving the well-being of the people it serves. Even puppets are involved.

BY SUSAN KREIMER

About 15 years ago, St. Joseph's/Candler Health System in Savannah, Ga., embarked on a course that would alter the health of its community for the better and in novel ways.

The board of trustees for its two hospitals probed deeply into problems plaguing local residents. They wondered what drove people to flood the emergency room. When the visits continue, "it's really a trailing indicator of something else that's going on. And that started the questioning," says Paul P. Hinchey, president and CEO.

"In our area, it was a much broader concept. There were many reasons why people have poor health," he adds, citing a lack of affordable housing, decent jobs, insurance and information to stay healthy. "The board thought it was really a formula of many factors, not just [lacking] access to a doctor."



TEACHING PUPPETS: One-hour puppet shows feature characters from different walks of life that teach kids about nutrition, exercise, drug prevention and the importance of regular visits to a dentist and doctor.

To resolve this dilemma, "the hospital had to get out into the neighborhood," Hinchey says. It couldn't expect people to always visit the central campuses. "We had town hall meetings to get our arms around what the need was."

Empowering residents to become partners in their health care — coupled with free access to diverse services such as a preschool for at-risk youth, after-school tutoring and tax preparation — earned St. Joseph's/Candler Health System the 2012 Foster G. McGaw Prize for Excellence in Community Service. The \$100,000 annual prize is awarded to a health care organization that delivers innovative programming to remarkably enhance the health and well-being of its community. Presented since 1986, it is sponsored by the Baxter International Foundation, the American Hospital Association and the Health Research & Educational Trust.

"St. Joseph's/Candler Health System takes a holistic approach to health care, believing that good health means addressing the whole person, not just physical health," says John O'Brien, chairman of the Foster G. McGaw Prize Committee. "The system's major initiatives tackle disparities in care to connect residents to essential resources, improve access to care for the uninsured, address basic life issues like housing and nutrition, and provide education in a variety of areas to help individuals and families overcome poverty."

Created in 1997, the faith-based and locally owned nonprofit health system functions as a joint agreement between St. Joseph's Hospital and Candler Hospital — two of the nation's longest continuously operating hospitals. A total of 636 licensed acute care beds serve more than 750,000 people in coastal Georgia and South Carolina, and the system employs more than 3,000 workers.

Health care offerings span the spectrum from local and regional primary care to specialized inpatient and outpatient services and home health, as well as a vast array of community outreach and educational initiatives.

Among its various programs, St. Joseph's/Candler was recognized for the African-American Health Information & Resource Center. The facility opened in 1999 and has served more than 15,000 people in the past year.

While addressing disparities, it links Savannah's poorest residents with such basic resources as health screenings and seminars, reading and math tutorial programs, computer and

LOOKING SHARP: The African-American Health Information & Resource Center operates a free eye clinic for the 60,000 uninsured people in Chatham County, Ga.





SWEAT & BE FIT:
The African-American Health Information & Resource Center operates a women's "living smart" fitness club.

Internet access, a women's "living smart" fitness club, and professional puppet shows that promote wellness among children.

"We incorporated the puppet and the storytelling hour into our program because we also wanted to make sure that health messages are getting to the young people," says Ella Williamson, the center's director. "Hopefully, we won't see so

many adults later on in life suffering from hypertension, heart disease and diabetes."

The one-hour puppet shows are booked at child care agencies and schools. Puppets representing individuals from different walks of life teach children about the importance of exercising, eating fruits and vegetables, staying away from drugs, and visiting the dentist and doctor

LOG ME IN:
The St. Joseph's /Candler Health System offers free computer training classes and Internet access for disadvantaged county residents.



for regular checkups. They even tackle the fear that delays preventive care.

Through singing, storytelling and skits, trained volunteer puppeteers — from college students to retired teachers — capture the kids' attention. While emphasizing the benefits of physical activity, they motivate young audiences to get up and dance.

"It's at their level," Williamson says. "And it's not as though somebody is preaching to them. They're learning information in a very fun and entertaining kind of way."

Nearly three years ago, the center launched a summer cooking camp for kids. During two four-week sessions each serving 20 to 25 school-aged children, Williamson coaches the youngsters in preparing nutritious breakfasts and lunches. They spend the half-day sessions making and tasting easy-to-whip-up smoothies, salads, bean dishes and vegetable omelets.

"When they're going to McDonald's, they'll think twice about saying 'supersize it,'" she explains. "Children can also put a lot of pressure on parents to eat better."

This summer, the cooking camp will incorporate a new component — recipes geared toward youths who already have type 2 diabetes.

Providing free medical care to those without health insurance is a hallmark of the community service that St. Joseph's/Candler exemplifies. Through Good Samaritan Clinic, medical translation services also are offered to the increasing proportion of the population that

needs it, particularly Latinos.

The clinic opened in 2007 as a collaborative effort between St. Joseph's/Candler, the Georgia Department of Community Health and a local Catholic church. In 2011, the program served more than 2,100 patients. An outcome study demonstrated that more than half of its diabetes education participants brought their blood sugar under control.

Also catering to the uninsured is St. Mary's Health Center, launched in 2005 as a two-morning-a-week triage and referral center. It began operating in a 10-by-10-foot space in St. Mary's Community Center's computer lab.

Now spanning 5,000 square feet, the center functions as a medical home 40 hours per week. More than 60,000 uninsured people in Chatham County, Ga., are eligible for free lab services, radiology, diagnostic testing, procedures, screenings and in-patient hospital stays, if necessary.

Among those benefiting from the health center is Henry Wall. In March 2012, he visited its eye clinic with a drooping left eyelid and thought he needed glasses. But the glasses didn't help, and he began to feel numb and paralyzed in his left leg. The diagnosis was myasthenia gravis, a chronic autoimmune neuromuscular disease.

"It makes one of your eyes turn to a lazy eye," says Wall, 34, who lives in Port Wentworth, Ga., on the outskirts of Savannah. Meanwhile, "I couldn't really maneuver my body."

Wall had been working full time for sev-

2012 Finalists

Three Foster G. McGaw Prize finalists were recognized for significant accomplishments in community service. Each received \$10,000:

- **Cheyenne (Wyo.) Regional Medical Center** for its commitment to building partnerships that promote healthy, strong and safe communities throughout Larimer County and the surrounding areas.
- **Seton Healthcare Family in Austin, Texas**, for working with health care providers and community partners to develop, fund and operate management innovations that will ensure access to quality care for thousands of uninsured and underinsured Central Texans.
- **Yale-New Haven (Conn.) Hospital** for its sponsorship, development and participation in a wide variety of community-based programs and services that benefit residents of New Haven and the surrounding region.



STORY HOUR:

Young schoolkids learn about health and wellness through the art of creative storytelling.



FUTURE FOODIES: The African-American Health Information & Resource Center offers summer cooking classes to teach kids the value of good nutrition with hands-on preparation of breakfasts and lunches.

eral years as a landscaper — a job that didn't provide health insurance. At his age, he didn't expect to need it. When he became ill, many health care facilities turned him down, but not St. Mary's Health Center.

With the diagnostic tests and visits to a neurologist, "St. Mary's helped me out a whole lot by narrowing down my problem," he says. Last July, he had open chest surgery at St. Joseph's Hospital to remove his thymus gland. The disease went into remission, though that may prove temporary. "They took excellent care of me," Wall says. "They helped me build my spirit up. I was feeling really down."

St. Mary's Community Center also can help point the way out of poverty. It offers a preschool program, after-school tutoring, General Education Development test preparation, money management counseling and job training skills to those from Savannah's poorest census tracts.

Another St. Joseph's/Candler initiative — the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program — partners with the Internal Revenue Service. Each year, about 30 volunteers prepare taxes at no charge for the "working poor."

The program, in force since 2002, has grown from 65 tax returns filed the first year, with total combined refunds slightly less than \$100,000, to 745 tax returns prepared in 2012, with an overall refund value of \$1.5 million. Last year, it served nearly 600 people during the six weeks from mid-January through late February.

Each participant receives refunds of about \$100 to \$500, based on the number of dependents. "For the working poor, I always say tax season is better than Christmas season," says Sister Pat Baber, who runs the walk-in program.

They spend the refund on basic necessities such as electricity, water bills, sofas, lamps, sheets, towels and beds for their children who might have been sleeping on futons or air mattresses. "It's truly a blessing for the working poor, but it's also a blessing for our local economy," Baber says. Most of her volunteers are full-time hospital employees who take a tax preparation course, "and they give freely of their time. It makes a huge, huge difference."

Hinchey, the health system's CEO, says its community service achievements can be replicated anywhere, from rural to urban areas. All that's needed is an unwavering will and commitment.

"It takes a long time to change anything," he says. "You're not going to get much success in one to two years. But in a decade, you can get meaningful results." — *Susan Kreimer is a freelance medical writer based in New York City.* ●