



HEALTHY STUDENTS:
A school nurse shows a student how to read her glucose monitor.

Covering the Spectrum of Community Need

Foster G. McGaw Prize winner **Spectrum Health** has two decades of community health wisdom to share

BY LAURIE LARSON

It was a tough day at Union High School for Kim [not her real name]. The freshman was coming down with some kind of bug, but didn't say anything to her mom who, as usual, was racing to get Kim to school before she headed to work. A pediatrician's appointment would have cost them both the whole day, with offices a long drive from their home in Grand Rapids, Mich. Kim struggled through her morning classes, feeling worse every hour. "Why don't you go to the school clinic?" her friend asked.

"I didn't know about the clinic until my friend suggested it," Kim says. "It was really good to go." Now a sophomore at Union, she also sees the health center's dentist, as well as a counselor and a dietitian. "I can ask questions about my health and put the answers to good use," she says. She is working with the dietitian to eat more healthfully and lose weight, and goes to

counseling "to stay positive about school and problems at home. My counselor gives me good advice — and everybody there is easy to talk to." Kim doesn't have daily appointments but she pops by the health center every day anyway just to say hello. "I've told my friends about the clinic because I think it could help them like it's helped me," she says.

There are four such high school health centers in Grand Rapids, run collaboratively by Cherry Health [a federally qualified health center], the Grand Rapids Public Schools and Spectrum Health. The clinics are part of Spectrum's larger School Health Program, a partnership with seven local school districts providing first aid, medication administration, immunizations, chronic-condition management and disease-prevention services to 29,000 students. The clinics are funded by the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services, the state department of education and Spectrum Health.

The School Health Program — and Kim's story — exemplify the everyday victories achieved among the five programs that comprise Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities Department. The department also operates and/or supports Community Partnership Health Care Programs, which provide free or discounted medical care to vulnerable local urban populations; Community Partnership Programs for Healthy Food; Community Partnership Programs to Create Healthy Lifestyles; and Core Health, a chronic-disease management program for at-risk area residents.

In recognition of Healthier Communities' two decades of outreach services dedicated to improving the health of underserved Western Michigan residents, Spectrum Health was awarded the 2016 Foster G. McGaw Prize for Excellence in Community Service. As the 31st recipient of the prize, sponsored by the Baxter International Foundation, the American Hospital Association and its affiliate, the Health Research & Educational Trust, the nonprofit integrated health system will receive \$100,000 to support and expand upon those efforts.

"Since 1997, Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities has built the infrastructure, resources, community-based programs and services to reach the people who need care the most," says John O'Brien, chair of the Foster G. McGaw Prize Committee. "Through impactful alliances with community organizations, Spectrum Health has shown incredible perseverance, patience and a vision to dramatically improve the health of individuals in their community and reduce health care costs."

"I am so proud of our team and grateful for their collaborative work," says Tina Freese-Decker, president of the Spectrum Health Hospital Group, which includes 12 hospitals, 180 ambulatory and service sites and more than 3,200 providers. "Everyone is focused on creating a culture of excellence."

Healthier Communities Vice President Ken Fawcett, M.D., believes there are three chief reasons the department has been recognized. "First, we have a comprehensive list of programs that support people throughout life's journey," he says. "Second, the community health workers in our maternal-infant health and Core Health programs establish great trust with their clients, often mentoring them through firsthand experience.

And finally, we know we can't do this work alone." Fawcett sits on four community boards and meets individually with various stakeholders every week. "I consider other community leaders as friends and partners. In the end, we're all trying to help those whose voices are not always heard."

Healthier Communities was launched 20 years ago with a three-pronged focus on reducing infant mortality and disparities in maternal-infant health; improving children's health; and preventing and managing chronic disease among those living in its 13-county service area. Spectrum Health dedicates \$6.8 million each year to the department.

To ensure that the budget continues to advance the department's goals in real time, every Healthier Communities program has a data measurement system, regularly comparing results with desired outcomes. "We are unrelentingly data-driven — and we want to make sure we are using every dollar in the best possible way," Fawcett says.



EARLY INTERVENTION:
A caseworker discusses the first tri-semester of pregnancy with a new mom.

Starting life strong

The Healthier Communities maternal-infant health initiative became a galvanizing priority for the department, fueled by a grim statistic: In 2003, Grand Rapids had the highest black infant mortality rate of any Michigan city — 22.4 deaths per 1,000 births, versus 6 deaths per 1,000 births among white infants. In 2016, the black infant mortality rate had dropped to 5.6 per 1,000 births — a 75 percent improvement — thanks to the Healthier Communities Strong Beginnings Program. The partnership's eight community organizations offer outreach, education, case management, mental health services and a fatherhood program, all part of its ongoing mission to improve maternal-child health and eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes, with a particular focus on the area's African-American and Latino communities.

The goal of Strong Beginnings is to ensure that all women



BANANA ANYONE?
The Community Food Club of Greater Grand Rapids has provided healthy food to low-income households in a grocery-store setting for the past three years.

begin prenatal care during their first trimester of pregnancy and continue regular care throughout their pregnancy and 24 months after delivery. Outreach staff provide breastfeeding education, help with groceries and baby supplies, and coordinate doctors' appointments, among other services.

"The key to our success has been a combination of community health workers' efforts and mental health services," says Peggy Vander Meulin, program director for Strong Beginnings. "There are multiple stressors in these communities. Being able to go into people's homes and engage with mothers and fathers has been very important."

Core Health

Since 2013, the Healthier Communities Core Health Program has been developing those same personal connections through its chronic-disease management program for underserved residents at risk for poor health outcomes. Community health workers and nurses make regular home visits to both urban and rural households, monitoring diabetes and asthma treatment compliance, helping patients to manage heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or following up on a hospital discharge. The program has reached 2,500 community members.

"Navigating the health system with a chronic illness is tough for anyone, but add in diminished resources, language barriers and other social determinants of health, and it's even tougher," says Bethany Swartz, Core Health's program supervisor. "Core Health seeks to walk through life with our clients." Recognizing the

need for more behavioral health services, the program added a licensed social worker to its staff last year. "Health may be the last thing people think about — food security, housing security, personal safety, transportation take priority," Swartz says. "Getting someone to feel safe and secure in their community is so important, because that stress will exacerbate all their other health problems."

Healthy food in reach

Understanding the vital link between food security and good health, a Healthier Communities pilot program, the Community Food Club of Greater Grand Rapids, has provided healthy food to low-income households in a grocery store setting for the past three years. Area residents at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level may be referred by one of seven community organizations, including Spectrum Health, for a 30-day membership to the Food Club, and membership is renewable as they need it for \$10 a month. Shoppers use Food Club points to purchase groceries, with fruits and vegetables "costing" the fewest points, encouraging healthy purchases while still allowing for personal choice.

"This has been a really grand experiment — we reached 1,400 households in our first year," says Holly Anderson, program manager of the Food Club. A member survey conducted six months into the pilot found a 33 percent reduction in members skipping meals, while 29 percent said they had improved their ability to meet their basic needs by shopping at the Food Club. Healthier Communities helps purchase the food, and local wholesalers are used as much as

possible for fresh vegetables, fruit, dairy products and meats.

Health and education

Although, as in a large family, it's impossible to choose a favorite child, Fawcett speaks with particular pride about the achievements — and necessity — of the School Health Program. "Without education, poverty is a near certainty, and education is key to better health outcomes," he says.

In the course of offering a mentoring program at a local elementary school 20 years ago, "our mentors saw the role chronic conditions played in allowing children to be in school," explains Tracy Zamarron, R.N., director of the School Health Program. Previously, parents of a child with diabetes or asthma, for example, would keep their child home if he or she were having a bad day because they felt responsible for administering and monitoring their medications. "Now, our services allow kids to participate in school without parents worrying about that, knowing we will make sure students adhere to their medications," Zamarron says.

Healthier Communities launched a pilot program that sent a school nurse and a community health worker to that first elementary school, where they saw 267 students in 1995. By the 2014–2015 school year, 61 RNs and 28 health aides had provided care to 28,864 students in 58 schools across seven Grand Rapids districts. That year, more than 98 percent of student visits for illness, injury or other problems were resolved without the need for further



WORKING IT:
Free group workouts are offered at several locations throughout the Grand Rapids area.

referrals. Emergency care action plans also have been developed for more than 2,400 children with asthma, diabetes, seizures, life-threatening allergies and other significant health problems. All services are free.

Lori Nieboer has been a physician assistant at the Union High School Health Center for five years. From sports physicals and flu shots to well-child exams and a range of risk assessments, she likes the close-knit coverage the clinic provides. "My patients are in this building all day — we can pull them from class if we're worried about them," she says. Parents feel the same way. "We get grateful calls from parents — just our being here is a weight off their shoulders to know their kids are getting good, quality care." Teens also learn how to navigate health care services, from learning how to make appointments to asking providers questions. "It gives power to teenagers — putting their care decisions in their own hands," Nieboer says.

As for the social work and counseling services available to teens, she says, "I can't imagine working without that component now. It's a gift to me and to the kids. Our students are at high risk for depression, abuse and trauma issues, and our social workers have all been trained to deal with those issues." Nieboer also can check in with the social workers to see if students need medical attention. "That mental-physical connection is especially important for teens who are at a volatile point in their lives," she says.

On-site counseling further "reduces the stigma of seeking behavioral health care," Freese-Decker adds. "These types of outreach tie into Spectrum Health's Heal the Whole Person initiative to address the social determinants of health care, connecting people to the resources they need."

Zamarron says absenteeism has dropped markedly since the School Health Program began and graduation rates have gone up. "We believe health care should be used as a tool to keep kids in school and promote the health of all communities," she says. "Spectrum Health's support is fantastic, providing access all day where it's needed most." The biggest contributor to the program's success has been the trust the school health staff have built with students and their families, she says.

"The kids are open to sharing their issues with us — and this may be their only access to health services."

Health for life — and possibly for a career

Underscoring Fawcett's belief about the direct correlation between good health, a solid education and economic well-being, Grand Rapids' Innovation Central High School also offers students the option to pursue one of four post-graduation career paths through its dedicated academies in: Business Leadership and Entrepreneurship; Design and Construction; Modern Engineering; and Health Sciences and Technology. Students must apply to the four academies, but all who do are accepted. One track in the Health Sciences Academy, in partnership with Spectrum Health, allows students to seek certification to become emergency medical technicians.

"Spectrum Health is the best community partner we could have," says Innovation Central Principal Mark Frost. "They don't just provide funds; they provide materials, people and ideas." He estimates 40 percent of Innovation Central's students choose the Health Sciences Academy. In addition to videos, patient simulators and other classroom materials, a Spectrum Health paramedic teaches a two-hour EMT class with a certified science teacher.

"These kids take the EMT and first responders' certification and can walk out of high school with a job," Frost says. "And if they become an ambulance driver, for example, they can use that job to help put themselves through college. The school sells itself — it has astonished the district." Like Union High School and the other two Grand Rapids high schools, Innovation Central also offers a full-service health center, another major recruitment tool. Among families of the school's 775 students this year, 550 filed consent forms for health services. Dental care is the biggest draw, but medical and behavioral health services are highly valued as well. "If you can't teach the whole kid, academic performance won't fly," Frost adds.

Spectrum Health President and CEO Richard Breen has this advice for health system leaders looking to make a similar positive impact in their communities: "Be bold. Convey a sense of urgency and hold people accountable to a timetable. Whether it's infant mortality, hospital readmission rates or access for underserved populations, don't be afraid to tackle a problem that may seem insurmountable. Over time, your message will be heard and your work will make a difference." — Laurie Larson is a freelance writer in Chicago. ●

Foster G. McGaw 2016 Finalists

Three health systems were awarded \$10,000 each by the Foster G. McGaw Prize committee in recognition of their outstanding community health programs. They are:



CHILDREN'S HEALTH SYSTEM OF TEXAS

The Dallas-based system has created a cross-sector coalition that takes a unique approach to improving the health and well-being of children in the community.



PROMEDICA

Based in Toledo, Ohio, ProMedica has established a significant number of innovative community health programs to help its low-income residents, from collaborative approaches for eliminating food insecurity to addressing peer abuse.



WHITE MEMORIAL MEDICAL CENTER

The Los Angeles medical center has developed several prevention programs for its patient population, including a healthy eating initiative and interventions for pregnant and post-partum women, in addition to promoting a health careers program to help sustain community health. ●

Spectrum Health's community-based chronic disease management program

[THE CHALLENGE]

Since 1997, Spectrum Health in Grand Rapids, Mich., has provided community-based care through its Healthier Communities initiative. Developed through the merger of two previous programs, Core Health was added in 2008 to provide in-home education on general wellness, including weight and stress control, for patients with early-stage chronic conditions, such as diabetes, heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Eventually, it became evident that Core Health, as originally designed, was not serving some of the communities' neediest members, those with more advanced disease, some of whom also had cognitive and behavioral challenges that made it difficult to benefit from the home-education curriculum.

"We realized that, wow, we're saying no to a cohort of people who don't have anywhere else to go" to learn how to better manage their health, says Core Health Program Supervisor Bethany Swartz.

► The solution

"We were challenged to shift the program to be able to serve those folks who were a little more clinically complex, a sicker population, those not so much in early-disease state," Swartz says, "and also those who cognitively didn't have the same capacity for learning and might have behavioral health issues that impede their ability to focus on their health first."

Like its predecessors, Core Health employs community health workers, or CHWs, who make home visits to at-risk populations in Spectrum's Grand Rapids and Greenville, Mich., markets. The program has been instrumental in improving patient health and reducing hospitalizations and emergency department visits among its participants.

Core Health tailored its services to the needs of its clients by adding a bilingual, licensed social worker and behavioral health screens for depression and anxiety. Core Health staff also developed a health risk assessment to better identify how social factors, such as housing, transportation, finances, food access, education, immigration status and relationship status, affect a client's health.

The original Core Health curriculum was modified to reflect clients' cognitive abilities and

pace of learning. As in the original program, the Core Health curriculum includes lessons on healthy eating, stress management and portion control. However, the order and topics are determined by client goals and not by a pre-designed curriculum, Swartz says.

While the original was a yearlong program, in its new iteration, there is no defined timetable. The program is deemed successful when clients demonstrate necessary self-care management skills.

"We changed how we define success," Swartz says.

► How it works

Core Health is staffed by six CHWs, three full-time-equivalent registered nurses who function as care managers, and a full-time, licensed social worker, in addition to Swartz, the program supervisor.

The CHWs visit three to four clients in their homes each day, spending about an hour with each, Swartz says, which allows them to see each of its approximately 300 clients about once a month.

During the visit, the CHW monitors the client's condition and helps to set goals, such as eating more healthfully or exercising more.

In addition, a care manager performs medication reconciliation with each client about every three months.

The CHWs maintain contact with a client's care manager and primary care physician. For example, if a client's blood pressure is higher than a certain level or blood sugars are too high or too low, the CHW will call either the care manager or the PCP for further instruction. "Our ultimate goal is to get the client to a place where they're using their primary care doctor to make their health decisions," Swartz says.

The CHW also documents the visit as part of the client's care plan in Spectrum's electronic health record, which is then routed to a Core Health care manager, who must approve the plan within 24 hours after it's sent.

CHWs are selected for their ability to relate to community members. They are intimately familiar with the barriers and struggles of the target population, says Mark Lubberts, R.N., manager of community health education for Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities outreach program.

"You're not looking for the person with the master's degree in public education," he says. "You want somebody who has lived the life of many of our clients."

Once selected, CHWs undergo rigorous training in a certification program developed jointly by Spectrum Health Healthier Communities and the Grand Rapids Community College to provide the Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance standardized curriculum. Upon completion, the student will receive a certificate from GRCC. To become certified for the Core Health program, CHWs are tested in eight competencies, including advocacy and outreach; community and personal strategies; legal and ethical responsibilities; teaching and capacity building; communication skills and cultural competencies; coordination, documentation and reporting; healthy lifestyles; and mental health. The eight-week onboard training includes classroom work, scenario precepting, job shadowing and peer mentoring, after which CHWs understand the nature of diabetes, heart failure and COPD, as well as the resources to manage them.

Newly minted CHWs also undergo Spectrum's systems, department and program orientations.

Swartz notes that CHWs are being used more frequently by hospitals these days, and that it has become a coveted career in the region. Often, there are more applicants than job openings. "I think that is in part due to the training and certification and the amount of attention that this position is getting at local, state and national levels," she says.

► Outcomes to date

In 2016, Core Health had the following results in client engagement and health and cost efficiency:

- Success for the client is measured using a patient activation measure, or PAM, score, which assesses a client's competence and readiness to manage his or her condition and engagement with primary care. In 2016, 70 percent of clients had a mean increase in their PAM scores of 26 percent. The client satisfaction rate was 97 percent.
- Objective measures of patient health indicate an improvement as well; more than 52 percent of diabetes clients decreased their A1c levels by an average of 17.2 percent during the period they participated in Core Health.
- Clients reduced the number of hospital stays and visits to the emergency department, which dramatically reduced Spectrum's costs to care for these patients.



CHECK, PLEASE
Nurse does a home wellness check on an elderly Grand Rapids-area resident through the Core Health program initiative

► Lessons learned

The major takeaway, Swartz says, is the extent to which factors other than physical health affect the client's ability to manage a chronic condition. "Looking back at the original design of Core Health, the behavioral and social health needs of our clients were probably underestimated," she says.

Core Health staff have come to appreciate the complexity of chronic conditions, especially for the program's target clientele. The acuity level of the clients' conditions and the number of community members who were not receiving appropriate care services were unexpected, Swartz says.

Modeling the program around the client's needs and capabilities is also much more productive than trying to mold clients into a certain approach, she says. This means that work with the clients is more intense, but often not as long.

"Our caseloads might be smaller, but we're discharging clients more successfully at a faster rate so we can open that slot to somebody new," Swartz says.

► Next steps

One future objective is to incorporate technology into home visits. Swartz perceives a great need

for pharmacy services, especially medication reconciliation for clients who are seeing providers from multiple health systems. Managing medication prescribed from non-Spectrum providers is often challenging, she says.

The solution most likely involves virtual visits, Swartz says.

Spectrum has a new online platform called MedNow that enables patient visits with a primary care physician or advance practice provider via online access.

Pharmacy visits might one day be offered through MedNow, as well. Virtual nurse visits would also allow care managers to "visit" more patients, expanding the effective client base of the program.

Whatever the approach, the goal is to keep evolving. "I think we can get creative," Swartz says.

"This has been an incredibly exciting program over the years," says Lubberts.

"It has impacted a lot of outcomes," she says, "but still the most impactful elements within this program were the times when I would receive phone messages from clients describing how a community health worker made all the difference in their lives."

— KAREN WAGNER ●