

Caring for a Community

Heartland Community Health Center

For the men and women filling the waiting room of the Heartland Community Health Center (HCHC) on Lawrence Avenue, the facility represents one of the few places in Chicago where they can receive medical care and be treated with dignity.

“They help me feel better,” says Mrs. Harris, an elderly patient who depends on the services available at HCHC. “They care.”

The HCHC provides quality, accessible medical care to people who are homeless, immigrants, those living with HIV/AIDS, and residents of the Albany Park, Rogers Park, Edgewater, and Uptown neighborhoods. In 2006, HCHC recorded nearly 15,000 patient visits.

“For our patients, this is the place to get good, quality health care that is culturally sensitive,” says Susan Hossli, director of quality and performance improvement at HCHC.

Filling the Health Care Gap

The HCHC fills a critical gap in the local health care system. Many Chicago neighborhoods are medically underserved, defined as an area with a scarcity of medical professionals — less than one primary care professional per 3500 residents (1:3500). The disparities in care between Chicago neighborhoods are enormous. Chicago’s affluent Lincoln Park neighborhood maintains a medical professional-to-resident ratio of 1:719; in Uptown, it is 1:5030, and in Rogers Park, a distressing 1:7334.

The regional health care system is clearly strained, with the loss of more than 17 Cook County hospitals since 1980 and the closing of 13 County health centers this past year. At the remaining clinics, the wait for an appointment can be up to six months. As a result, the emergency room becomes the option of choice for many people who are uninsured, creating a burden on patients, the hospital, and the health care system.

Providing a Medical Home

“We’re the last place people can go to receive care without using the emergency room as their main health center,” Hossli says. “We give people a medical home.”

Dr. Marcia Katz, a 13-year veteran of HCHC, says, “Unfortunately, for some people there’s a permanence to the homeless state. I’ve been seeing some people as long as I’ve been here. They’re my patients and I’m their primary physician.”



The Heartland Community Health Center’s providers offer a range of services, including primary and mental health care, radiology, a diagnostic laboratory, and well-child care.

Communication is essential to the delivery of quality care. Many people, though, cannot or will not seek health care because of language barriers. According to Hossli, with the influx of immigrants in the area, 30 percent of HCHC’s patients are best served in a language other than English, including Polish, French, Urdu, Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Bulgarian, Bosnian, Russian, Khmer, Somali, and Arabic.

“We have greatly increased our use of Heartland Alliance’s Cross-Cultural Interpreting Services, our in-house translating and interpreting service,” Hossli says.

As new populations settle in the Chicago area, Heartland Alliance offers workshops to heighten caregivers’ cultural sensitivity.

“This is a great job,” Dr. Katz says. “It’s challenging clinically, we have an amazing staff, and we take a team approach. Everybody here communicates the same message: we want to help.” ■

“We provide help to those who want help,” says HCHC medical assistant Tiffany Daniels. “Participants are really appreciative.”

