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Advocacy in Action at Health Centers in Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Chicago

By [Lindsey \(Reynolds\) Ruivivar](#)

I recently had the opportunity to visit four health centers in Wisconsin and Illinois. At each one, I spoke with committed health center staff, viewed great facilities, learned about plans for the future, and discussed advocacy efforts.

At 16th Street Community Health Center in Milwaukee, which celebrated its 40th Anniversary this month, I met John Bartkowski the President and CEO. John began as a Board member of the health center then moved on to become the CEO. During a tour of the health center, John described its maternity program, which has had a dramatic impact on infant mortality and health outcomes. I was pleased to learn that 16th Street, like many health centers, has a full time staff member who does both marketing and government affairs. Government affairs and advocacy are natural pieces of public relations and communication efforts. The role of a health center advocate is to connect with elected officials in a meaningful way, building relationships to communicate the health centers' goals and needs. 16th Street Community Health Center is a great example of a health center committed effective advocacy.

I also met with Sarah Andritsch, Marketing and Outreach Coordinator for Westside Healthcare Association in Milwaukee. Sarah has been with the health center about a year and a half and has hit the ground running. Like many health centers (and NACHC!), Westside is anxiously waiting to hear about their FIP grant so they can move forward building a much needed new health center. I visited their main site, where they have run out of room and are planning to build a new three-story building. This would also allow them to consolidate their administrative offices at the health center to increase staff productivity. I saw the health records staff, which had recently moved into the unfinished basement because they have simply run out of space. Sarah also took me to the health center's second site, located in a public housing complex, which is also incredibly crowded. Several of the providers are National Health Service Corps (NHSC) scholars, so I mentioned the provisions in the U.S. House passed health reform bill, which would fund \$2 billion for the NHSC program. Sarah's passion and enthusiasm was contagious; she is serving as a great resource, providing all of the health center staff with regular advocacy updates.

Following my "double-dip" of health centers in Milwaukee, I drove into the heart of Chicago to visit Erie Family Health Center. I have been connected with Erie via both Twitter (you can follow the health center @ErieFHC1701) and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/eriefamilyhealth>), so this was a great opportunity to meet their staff in person. Steph Willding and Jaclyn Sharratt-Smith coordinated a meeting for me with the health center's President and CEO, Dr. Lee Francis. Dr. Francis' took the time to allow me to video record him describing the importance of health reform for health centers. Dr. Francis has made it a point to advocate to his Members of Congress in support of the health center-

specific priorities in health reform – something that every health center advocate needs to do now.

My final visit was with Jack Waters, Executive Director of Kenosha Community Health Center in Kenosha. Never before had I been in a health center that felt so much like a home. The health center has been decorated with care and purpose, using warm colors, furniture, and home décor to help patients feel comfortable. The health center has utilized stimulus funding to update the building and create additional exam space. Jack described their goal as truly meeting the needs of their community, and that will require creating 45 dental exam operatories. Dental access is a huge need for the community, along with mental health services, so Kenosha Community Health Center has risen to the challenge. They hope to use more stimulus dollars to utilize the second floor of the building at their dental site to create additional dental exam space. The health center has also received funding through an earmark by their Congressman, who has visited the site to see how the federal dollars were used.

Kenosha is a great example of the value of your health center’s relationship with your Members of Congress. Beyond funding projects, a good relationship can also impact your Member’s vote on legislation impacting the entire health centers program, like national health care reform. The health center has also taken the next step by staying in touch with their Congressman and having him visit the health center.

As a health center advocate, it is only by staying in touch with your Members of Congress and their staff that you can maintain the relationship you need. Then you will be able to pick up the phone and speak with the Member or their Health Legislative Assistant, Legislative Director, or Chief of Staff, who will know what “FQHC” means (because you have already educated them), and ask them to support your center and the health center program.

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