

A KIDS' "CARE-VAN"

*Hospital's Mobile Health Program
Provides Screenings for Neighborhood Children*

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Franciscan Children's Hospital & Rehabilitation Center is a 100-bed pediatric specialty hospital and day school in Boston. In 1991 our hospital, New England's largest pediatric rehabilitation facility, began looking for ways to contribute to the overall health of its community, the Allston-Brighton neighborhood.

The hospital formed a Community Health Committee to conduct a needs assessment. The survey showed that Allston-Brighton especially needed better access to the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program (WIC) and dental care and health education for its children and adolescents.

The committee decided that a mobile screening program was the best way to reach Allston-Brighton's children. The "Kids' Care-Van," of which I was named program manager, was launched in June 1993.

A CHANGING NEIGHBORHOOD

Over the past 25 years Allston-Brighton, originally Irish- and Italian-American, has become the

home of minority groups and immigrants from Central and South America, Asia, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Africa. According to the 1990 census, 28 languages are now represented in this part of Boston. Our neighborhood's population is not only diverse but youthful: A majority of the population is under 18 years of age.

Allston-Brighton is often the first place of residence for people who come to Boston from other countries. Such populations are likely to face economic, cultural, and linguistic barriers when seeking healthcare. Franciscan Children's Hospital provides interpreter services for patients and their families. It also participates in the Allston-Brighton Healthy Boston Coalition, which helps neighborhood residents break through such barriers by providing them with English-language classes and job-training programs.

THE KIDS' CARE-VAN

Besides being the Kids' Care-Van program manager, I am also the van's pediatric nurse practition-

Summary Last year Franciscan Children's Hospital & Rehabilitation Center in Boston launched a "Kids' Care-Van" in an attempt to better serve the children of its community.

That community, the city's Allston-Brighton neighborhood, is the home of many immigrants and minority group members, people likely to face economic, cultural, and linguistic barriers when seeking healthcare. A survey showed that neighborhood children especially needed better access to the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC), health education, and dental care.

The Kids' Care-Van regularly tours Allston-Brighton, making stops at schools, Head Start programs, day care centers, a youth club, and the

local YMCA. At those stops children are given medical and dental screenings; if needed, referrals are made to other healthcare sources. Parents, children, and adolescents are also given information about prevention and wellness.

To date, 2,500 neighborhood children have been served. Approximately 70 percent have been found to be in urgent need of dental care, a serious problem because many Allston-Brighton parents cannot afford to pay for such care. Few Boston dentists accept Medicaid payment, and there are no other state or federal resources. The van program's manager is currently negotiating with area universities and lobbying local members of the State legislature in hopes of getting some assistance.

er and its driver. I am frequently joined on my neighborhood tours by WIC representatives and a dentist. We make stops at four neighborhood schools, two Head Start programs, two community day care centers, a YMCA, and a Boys' and Girls' Club.

These stops are planned in collaboration with school nurses and supervisors of the WIC and youth programs. The van spends two or three days at each site.

The van offers basic screenings for dental health, growth and development, hearing, scoliosis, vision, and nutrition. When medical follow-up is indicated, I arrange it with an appropriate healthcare professional. Children who have no insurance or primary care provider are given appointments at a primary care clinic at the hospital, which I run twice a week. I also make referrals, for those children who need them, to counseling and psychological services.

EDUCATION AND NUTRITION

Another of the van's primary purposes is to provide children and adolescents with education about a variety of health-related topics. These talks, which I give, include information about dental health, nutrition, bicycle and water safety, smoking cessation, immunization, and fire prevention.

The topic chosen usually depends on the age and needs of the particular audience. When meeting with adolescents, I talk also about AIDS, teenage pregnancy, and parenting. These latter topics sometimes make parents so uncomfortable that they ask me to pick another subject—bicycle safety, say—instead.

The van program is an opportunity for collaboration by community service providers. For example, representatives from the local WIC office ride in the van approximately three times a month to certify pregnant women and their children to receive food vouchers and to provide them with nutrition information. On these trips, I offer women counseling on such issues as breast feeding and infant growth and development.

The Kids' Care-Van also works closely with

The van program is an opportunity for collaboration by com- munity service providers.

other local health service providers, such as St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Brighton and the Joseph Smith Community Health Center in Allston. And, in one project cosponsored with a business, we provide children's car seats to families who could not afford them. The seats were donated to Franciscan Children's Hospital by the Midas Muffler & Brake Shop's Project Safe Baby.


DENTAL SCREENING

The van's visits to Head Start programs and elementary schools have revealed a special need for dental services for the children of Allston-Brighton. The van is equipped with a dental chair. A dentist from Boston University's Goldman School of Graduate Dentistry conducts the screenings. Approximately 70 percent of the children screened have been found to be in urgent need of dental care.

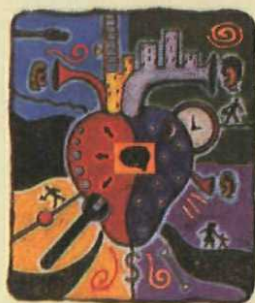
Follow-up of these dental problems has proved to be a major problem. Many of Allston-Brighton's parents cannot afford to pay for their children's dental care, very few Boston dentists accept Medicaid payment, and there are no other state or federal resources for children's dental care. We are negotiating with Boston University, Tufts University, and other local healthcare institutions in hopes of solving this problem.

Dental neglect can, after all, lead to poor nutrition and even become a source of chronic infection. Because this is so, I have recently been lobbying local state legislators on behalf of children's dental care.

Since its inception, the Kids' Care-Van has served 2,500 Allston-Brighton children. We hope that, by continuing to reach out to communities in need, we can make prevention more of a reality to Boston's children and adolescents. □

 For more information on Kids' Care-Van, call Brigitte Paine at 617-254-3800, ext. 3600.

Some information for this article was provided by Robert F. Glowacky, former director of planning and marketing, Franciscan Children's Hospital & Rehabilitation Center, Boston.



A Commitment to Community