

Community Benefit Programs For Young People

BY RHODA WEISS

Although many hospital associations focus on the needs of their members, Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania is enlisting its members and local organizations to focus on the needs of their communities through "Healthy Communities for Western Pennsylvania."

This regional community outreach effort is designed to enhance working relationships between healthcare providers and their communities to make a measurable positive impact on the health and well-being of western Pennsylvanians.

"When the first western Pennsylvania hospitals opened 150 years ago, they were tightly interwoven with their communities," explains Lynne Robinson, the council's associate vice president of public affairs. "All were literally built by the hands of the people they served, who gave generously of time, money, and resources for the sole purpose of meeting a community need."

"Although this mission has not fundamentally changed, today's complicated economic and social environment suggests a need to refocus on a more cooperative approach among all healthcare stakeholders to maximize the use of limited resources through community partnerships."

With that in mind, the council developed Healthy Communities. Since 1992, a group of dedicated volunteers, representing 71 hospitals, 180 school partners, and scores of healthcare and school professionals, has offered programs that have benefited more than 50,000 children and young people.

PROFESSIONALS LEARN TO SHARE

Coordinators of each of the programs attend quarterly professional development seminars at the council offices in Warrendale to share ideas and learn about community partnership building, conducting and analyzing needs assessments, and evaluation techniques.

Community Partnership Programs sponsored by the hospital council provide members an opportunity to develop working relationships



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with a number of community service agencies in the region. At a recent session, representatives of the Dairy and Nutrition Council offered a comprehensive seminar on innovative teaching techniques for nutrition education. Family Health Council also cosponsored a program on developing effective health education exhibits.

These and other workshops geared toward teachers, school nurses, and community health educators connect participants with community resources and teaching tools to enrich curricula, as well as make learning about good health more exciting. In addition, the Healthy Communities Annual Health Exchange brings together healthcare organizations, schools, community agencies, and others for a daylong event that includes exhibits, speakers, and idea sharing.

"Since physical and mental well-being affects every aspect of life, this positive approach to healthcare ensures the strength and productivity of our citizens and provides a model and clear demonstration of how healthcare providers and their communities can work hand in hand to tangibly improve the health of all people," says Robinson.

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Healthy Communities emphasizes that participants need to offer community benefit programs that result in measurable outcomes related to the improvement of health.

The first phase of the program focuses on children. "The young are among our poorest and most vulnerable citizens, and childhood is the point of origin for many health conditions," says Robinson. "Providing children with access to preventive services and education helps head off these issues before they become serious problems."

Each participating hospital and its local school and community service agencies conduct a health needs assessment of a specific student population and develop a baseline statement that serves as the framework for activities. Because of this approach,

activities often vary from school to school. The health partners regularly evaluate target populations' changes in health status against the baseline. The results not only demonstrate a program's impact, but also suggest possible refinements to provide the most effective approach.

COMMUNITY SUCCESSES

Members of the Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania have responded enthusiastically to the council's call to sponsor Healthy Communities programs to benefit the region's youth.

Pittsburgh's Allegheny General Hospital and the city's board of education have teamed up to establish a wellness center within a middle school as part of the board's School Partnership Program. The center provides services such as routine checkups and help with psychosocial problems. Several hospitals in western Pennsylvania sponsor similar school-based services that respond to a range of healthcare needs. The school-based program sponsored by Magee-Womens Hospital, Pittsburgh, also part of the School Partnerships Program, offers pregnant students a range of prenatal services. Other hospitals offer teen parenting programs.

Allegheny Valley Hospital sponsors a chapter of the International Drug Free Youth Club at area high schools. To be eligible for membership in the club, students are tested, at no charge, to ensure they are drug and alcohol free. In a survey, 23 percent of students said they would have started using drugs had they not joined the club.

During Teen Awareness Day, Greene County Memorial Hospital, Waynesburg, warns students of the dangers of smoking and drug abuse. Other hospitals support similar programs.

Because injuries are common in children, many Healthy Communities programs focus on safety. Pittsburgh's South Side Hospital recently reached more than 100 children through an injury-prevention and bicycle-safety program. United Community Hospital, Grove City, also teaches 5- to 10-year-olds safe bicycling habits. In addition, each child receives a protective helmet.

Other hospitals in western Pennsylvania provide students information on healthy eating habits and the benefits of exercise. Some of these healthy life-style programs even offer free cholesterol screenings and follow-up services for youths with abnormal results. Free dental care is an important service Indiana Hospital offers.

The community benefit services hospitals are offering to children in western Pennsylvania are having a positive impact. "Healthy Communities empowers people to take charge of their health through education on and access to services that directly translate into fewer individuals needing

intense and expensive treatment for serious conditions," says Robinson.

COUNCIL PROGRAMS

The Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania has created "Project Healthy Tomorrows" (a collaboration of Healthy Communities and the council's Center for Health Careers program) to increase students' access to health education and information on healthcare careers. The program achieves this by enhancing current health education curricula in schools and giving students the opportunity to explore a variety of healthcare careers.

HealthWorks, the first initiative of Project Healthy Tomorrows, is an eight-page, quarterly educational newspaper that focuses on health topics and is targeted to middle-school students. All western Pennsylvania middle-school health teachers receive *HealthWorks* and accompanying teacher's guide at no charge. *HealthWorks* is guided by an editorial board that includes area education, healthcare, and publishing professionals and an advisory panel of middle-school students.

Another Project Healthy Tomorrows effort is "HealthQuest Challenge," a regional question-and-answer competition that focuses on wellness and healthcare careers. Designed for high school sophomores, HealthQuest Challenge believes it will attract nearly 170 area schools to participate in the program's first year. The hospital council has provided the schools with study materials and the resources needed to prepare students for the competition, which will be held in April 1995. Schools are sponsored and tutored by hospital council members.

CONSUMER-FRIENDLY CARE

"Healthy Communities on its own cannot vanquish all the healthcare challenges facing our region," says Robinson. "However, it points the way to a more effective, consumer-friendly healthcare system—a system that is directly responsive to the healthcare needs of the community, gets maximum use from finite healthcare resources, and achieves cost savings through creative healthcare strategies.

"In this respect, Healthy Communities represents an overall shift in how healthcare delivery is viewed and managed. The gap between the current and an ideal healthcare system is still quite vast. But, by providing a model for change, Healthy Communities takes a significant step toward closing the space." □

 For more information on the Healthy Communities program, call Lynne Robinson, 412-772-7227.

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