



# A Wondrous History of Community Benefit

*"When the need was there, so were the sisters. They lovingly answered the call to care of those ravaged by birth, infirmity, or old age."*

—*A Call to Care* (Catholic Health Association, St. Louis, 1996)

**Q:** Community Benefit is a new and emerging topic in health care today. True or false?

**A:** Could not be more false. Community benefit has been part of the history of Catholic and other not-for-profit health care organizations from the very beginning.

The Catholic health care ministry's tradition of community service in this country began when the first sisters arrived in what now is the United States. To be precise, it began on August 7, 1727, when, after a five-and-a-half-month sea voyage, a dozen Sisters of St. Ursula arrived in New Orleans from France. The Ursulines had been cloistered in their native country, but in America they nursed, cared for orphans, and taught school. Seven years after their arrival, they opened a hospital.

The Ursulines set a pattern for those who would follow them—they looked around to see what needed doing and they did what had to be done. Religious sisters cared for victims of smallpox, cholera, typhus, and yellow fever. They nursed soldiers on the battlefields during the Civil War. They built hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics. They integrated hospitals. They spoke out on behalf of justice.

Continuing this tradition of service, congregations of religious women and men and dioceses have served America's communities. They identified needs; they took action.

## STORIES OF THE MINISTRY

Here are some of the stories that make up the history of the Catholic ministry, taken from *A Call to Care*.<sup>1</sup>

■ *Tucson, AZ* In 1870, seven Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet left St. Louis for Tucson. They traveled by train, wagon, raft, and on foot. They encountered 125-degree heat, wild animals, marriage proposals from ranchers, and advances from drunken cowboys. But when they arrived in Tucson, they were greeted by a huge cheering crowd. In that growing city, they taught school at first, but when the Southern Pacific Railroad arrived in the late 1870s and it became clear that a hospital was needed, the sisters opened St. Mary's.

■ *Washington State* Mother Joseph, a Sister of Providence of Montreal, led a small group of sisters to serve in the northwest. The sisters visited the sick, took in orphans, and cared for displaced Native Americans. Mother Joseph not only opened orphanages, schools, and hospitals; she designed and built them as well. To raise money for the buildings, she begged in mining camps. Under her direction, more than 30 hospitals, schools, and orphanages were opened in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia. The American Institute of Architects has honored Mother Joseph, and a statue representing her can be seen in the Capitol in Washington, DC. Before she died of a brain tumor in 1902, she told the sisters, "Whatever concerns the poor is always our affair."

■ *Honolulu* Six Sisters of St. Francis of Syracuse traveled from New York to serve at the Branch Hospital in Kakaako, Honolulu, a facility for people suspected of having leprosy. The sisters found chaos: filthy conditions, lawlessness, and violence. They began stringent sanitary procedures, nursed the lepers, and formed a school for the healthy children of leprosy parents. Later,



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at the request of the legendary Fr. Damien de Veuster, several sisters went to the Leper Settlement in Molokai to take charge of the new Bishop Home for Unprotected Leper Girls and Women. After Fr. Damien died of leprosy, the sisters took over the boys' home as well.

■ *Minnesota* In 1893, Minnesota was experiencing a logging boom. Unfortunately, the men working in the logging camps had no access to health care. The Benedictine Sisters of St. Joseph creatively found a way to finance needed care. They sold "lumberjack tickets" guaranteeing purchasers care at St. Mary's Hospital in Duluth and at any other Benedictine hospital in the state. The chief saleswoman for the program was Sr. Amata Mackett, who visited lumber camps, darning socks, listening to problems, and baking pies.

■ *New Orleans* Henriette DeLille, a free woman of African descent, was born to a well-to-do family in the age of slavery. As a girl, she began visiting the sick and aging of her race, both slave and free. With two other women, she founded the Sisters of the Holy Family. They moved into a small rented house that they turned into a convent, bringing with them five elderly women from the neighborhood. This was the beginning of the Lafon Nursing Home of the Holy Family, which, now more than 160 years old, is one of the oldest nursing homes in the country.

■ *Richmond, VA* Two hundred and thirty-two Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul nursed both Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War. Within days after war was declared, they opened two military hospitals in Richmond. They served in the battlefield, in tents, in camps reserved for con-

tagious cases, and in military prisons.

■ *New York City* Rose Hawthorne was the daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter*. She learned that poor people who had cancer (then believed to be contagious) were sent to grim Blackwell's Island in New York's East River. Rose moved to the poorest section of New York City to live among the poor and began taking in people who had cancer. In 1899, Rose, who later became Mother Mary Alphonsa, and a friend founded a congregation of Dominican sisters and opened the St. Rose's Free Home for Incurable Cancer, which still operates today.

■ *Wheeling, WV* In 1951, 20 staff nurses at St. Francis Hospital in Wheeling, WV, quit because the administrator, Sr. Helen Clare Bauerback, refused to dismiss three African-American nurses. In opposition to the medical staff, Sr. Helen and the other sisters sent for sisters from other hospitals, and with their help were able to keep St. Francis open. Fr. John LaFarge, SJ, chaplain of the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, called the Wheeling sisters' actions "a historic turning point in the history of interracial relations in this country." ■

*Tell us your organization's history of community benefit and we'll post it on CHA's website.*

### NOTE

1. Suzy Farren, *A Call to Care: The Women Who Built Catholic Healthcare in America*, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis, 1996.

Megan  
wants to  
be like  
every other  
little girl.



But Megan is not like most other little girls because she has **Progeria**, a rapid aging disease that causes **children to die** by their early teens from heart disease or stroke. **Help** The Progeria Research Foundation save Megan and children like her.

