

# HOW COMMUNITY BENEFIT SERVES AS A LIVING EXPRESSION OF CATHOLIC HEALTH'S MISSION AND COMMITMENT

**W**hile many in Catholic health care are familiar with our Catholic social teaching and the ways it is embedded in the care that we provide, these Catholic social teachings are also the central tenets of our community benefit programs and activities.



**NANCY  
ZUECH LIM**

The origin of community benefit dates to the establishment of Catholic health care in the United States, back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when religious women and men — often immigrants themselves — responded to the urgent social and health needs of their communities, especially for those experiencing poverty and marginalization. Over the years, they established hospitals, clinics and social service agencies. Their work was driven by faith and a profound sense of justice.

During CHA's Community Benefit 101: Planning and Reporting Nonprofit Hospital Community Benefit virtual training this past fall, Sr. Teresa Maya, CCVI, senior director of theology and sponsorship at CHA, elevated the mission imperative of community benefit and called on us to remember our "Why": why our organizations were founded and why as leaders in Catholic and nonprofit health care we are called to serve.

Sr. Maya shared that the "Why" of community benefit is based in mercy, with Jesus as healer. His work and actions help others in response to the needs around him. Sr. Maya shared that mercy is the very heart of community benefit.<sup>1</sup> From the actions of seeing a need and responding came our community benefit mission to care and commit to our communities. This expression of our mission, which is also based in our Catholic social teaching, came long before the federal policy requirements for tax-exempt hospitals, and is the "Why" of community benefit.

### MERCY AND VALUES IN ACTION

In articulating the mission imperative of community benefit, Sr. Maya shared the vision and commitment of community benefit activities:<sup>2</sup>

- Cherish the dignity of all people by improving access to health care for all individuals, regardless of race, gender, culture or economic status.
- Promote the common good by addressing social conditions, such as housing, education, employment and the environment.
- Prioritize people and populations that experience vulnerabilities, ensuring that those most in need receive appropriate care and support.
- Steward resources responsibly, using them where they are most needed and most effective.
- Advocate for justice, working to eliminate disparities in health outcomes and access.
- Care for the whole person, recognizing the complexity of health and designing programs that include prevention, education and holistic services.
- Work in solidarity with communities, building trust, listening deeply and sharing decision-making.

These commitments are grounded in Catholic social teaching and are universal among non-profit health care. These principles are not just aspirational; they are operational and actionable. They are the bedrock that guides the assessment of community health needs, develops responses, implements programs and evaluates their impact. These actions demonstrate a profound commitment to human dignity, the common good and a preferential option for individuals experiencing

poverty and other vulnerabilities. Community benefit is a living expression of mercy and the values that have guided Catholic health care for centuries.

#### **TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES**

At the heart of community benefit is a commitment to the dignity of every person. Catholic and other nonprofit hospitals are concerned with the health of all people in their communities and consider the whole person, including their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs. Understanding that how well and how long we live is impacted by social factors, including policies and community structures, community benefit extends beyond the walls of hospitals and clinics, seeking out all in need and working for the common good. Community benefit programs seek to address barriers to health and well-being, and those engaged in the work advocate for policies and practices that promote health equity so all may flourish.

There are four transformative practices that are key to community benefit's success: humility, solidarity, patience and trust. Sr. Maya described

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— SR. TERESA MAYA, CCVI

these practices and encouraged us to seek what is ours to do. In addition to assessing the needs, community benefit involves looking also for what is working and can be built upon. It is important to acknowledge the need to work in partnership with our communities, each other and other organizations. We need to have patience for the programs and the impact to unfold. We also need to trust each other and be trustworthy for the benefit of our communities.

As Sr. Maya said during the session, "These are practices that take a lifetime, practices that need friends, and practices that need faith. ... Faith in the human friend and faith in the human future and faith that what we do can make a difference."

#### **STORIES OF IMPACT**

Across the country, Catholic and other nonprofit health care organizations demonstrate their mission and commitment through community benefit activities and programs.<sup>3</sup> They are investing in community health needs assessments, forming partnerships with public health and community-based organizations,<sup>4</sup> and developing innovative programs that address acute needs and the root causes of illness. They are also advocating for systemic change, recognizing that health is shaped by policies, institutions and social norms.<sup>5</sup>

An example of working in solidarity by responding to identified community health needs is a new health center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, developed in response to community members wanting more access to health and social services. The new health center includes exam rooms, a teaching kitchen, a laboratory, a pediatric therapy center, office space for community health workers, and classroom and meeting spaces. The center's plans include addressing workforce supports, financial empowerment, support groups for seniors and domestic violence survivors, and

other groups for caregivers and patients with chronic diseases and conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Another example is the support of respite centers, with a focus on supporting patients who are experiencing homelessness.<sup>7-9</sup> These centers, created through partnerships with other organizations, fill a gap in our communities, providing a safe and caring place for recovery after discharge.

These examples, along with the numerous community benefit programs, demonstrate mercy and our commitment to care for our communities. Community benefit programs are the modern embodiment of this mission, addressing not only medical needs but also the social determinants of health that shape lives and communities.

#### **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Community benefit has its challenges and is also a great opportunity. "Community benefit typically falls outside the core business of most health care delivery organizations," explained Sr. Maya during her presentation, "and moves beyond acute and episodic care of individuals who are sick."

However, she explained, community benefit is an opportunity. The programs and activities provide a space to “reorient the organization to its core mission and to improve the health of all people in the community.”<sup>10</sup>

As Catholic and other nonprofit health care organizations move forward, the mission of community benefit remains a guiding light. It calls leaders to be bold, compassionate and innovative. Its mission challenges health care organizations to look beyond their walls and engage with the broader social fabric. And it reminds us that health is not just a personal issue; it is a communal one.

### **A MISSION TO SERVE, HEAL AND UPLIFT**

In a time of rapid change and persistent disparities in how well and how long people live, community benefit offers a hopeful vision for the future. It affirms that every person deserves to be seen, heard and treated with care. It insists that health care must be rooted in justice and love. And it invites us to build a future where all people can flourish.

Community benefit is the living expression of Catholic and other nonprofit health care’s mission to serve, heal and uplift. Grounded in mercy, guided by values and focused on the future, it represents their commitment to the health and well-being of all. As Sr. Maya shared, “Community benefit reminds us why nonprofit health care exists, where care for all is the reason we were founded.”

**NANCY ZUECH LIM, MPH, BSN**, is director of community health improvement for the Catholic Health Association, Washington, D.C.

### **NOTES**

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