

Breaking the Chain Of Poverty

BY SR. FRANCES WEBSTER, RSM, RN

Fearing that the poor in their community were not obtaining life's basic necessities, the staff at Mercy Hospital, Bakersfield, CA, began the Mercy Southeast project 10 years ago. Mercy Southeast project coordinators reach people other social service and healthcare agencies overlook. They help the poor in their community obtain food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare and provide them with the skills they need to rise out of poverty.

Healthcare and material assistance for the poor is merely a temporary solution; it does not break the chain of poverty. To accomplish this, coordinators offer programs to build children's self-esteem, help them develop moral values, and encourage them to attend a college or a trade school so that as adults they will find jobs and earn enough money to afford adequate food, housing, and healthcare.

CONCERN FOR THE POOR

In 1981 the state of California developed Medi-Cal, a system of contracting with specific organizations to provide healthcare to Medicaid patients. Before Medi-Cal, Mercy cared for more Medicaid patients than any private hospital in Bakersfield. However, because Medi-Cal offered reimbursement below the hospital's cost, Mercy could not participate in the program. This resulted in the discontinuance of services Mercy previously provided to the needy. The Sisters of Mercy of Burlingame, CA, Mercy Hospital's sponsor, became concerned that those with special needs would no longer have access to the high-quality care that the hospital had been providing.

Although Mercy Hospital continued to provide some healthcare through its charity program, it was impossible for the hospital to serve a large number of needy persons. Therefore Mercy's board of directors, administrators, and sponsor began to look for new ways to serve the poor. The Mercy Southeast project began to take shape.



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AREA OF MOST NEED

After much discussion, the hospital's board of directors and Sr. Phyllis Hughes, RSM, who was Mercy's president at that time, decided to develop a program to meet some of the needs of the poor while promoting better health. The board and Sr. Hughes believed that a low-income area in the southeast side of Bakersfield would benefit most from such a program.

Of the area's 30,000 residents, 9,000 (30 percent) are black and 13,500 (45 percent) are Hispanic. The remaining 25 percent of area residents come from a variety of other ethnic backgrounds.

Each ethnic group has unique problems; however, inadequate education and housing and unemployment are common to all minorities. About 23 percent of the project area's Hispanics speak little or no English, which makes finding employment especially difficult.

PROJECT ORGANIZATION

Mercy hired two coordinators to lead the Mercy Southeast project. The coordinator for the black community is a lifelong area resident, a nurse whom residents see as a leader. A Sister of Mercy serves as coordinator for the Hispanic community. She is a licensed clinical social worker and a registered nurse. Residents outside these two communities also take advantage of Mercy Southeast programs.

The coordinators act as supervisors, program developers, resource specialists, and staff workers. Their tasks include working with community agency leaders, speaking at local club meetings to request assistance, serving hot meals to the hungry, arranging funeral services, counseling, and teaching the poor how to deal with problems. Although many volunteers help, the coordinators attend each activity to ensure that a leader is present if the volunteer is unexpectedly absent.

The project coordinators also purchase supplies and equipment for the project themselves, rather than using the hospital's purchasing de-

partment. As a result, the coordinators have negotiated with local businesses to get many items at greatly reduced prices.

Assessing Need During the project's first year, the coordinators met with area residents and community leaders to determine residents' needs. Mercy Hospital also hired a consulting firm to assess the targeted area's special needs. The findings of the consulting firm and those of the coordinators were in agreement: Many area residents lacked education and job skills, they lived in inadequate housing and received inadequate healthcare, and many were unemployed.

Networking To form a network with other community agencies, Mercy Hospital shared the findings of the consulting firm and those of the coordinators with more than 50 agencies that work with persons who have special needs.

As a result of these contacts, individuals, organizations, businesses, and agencies have assisted the Mercy Southeast project. The coordinators approach local service clubs, churches, school districts, health departments, law enforcement agencies, fire departments, and a variety of other social service and community-based agencies. Although Mercy Hospital grants the Mercy Southeast project more than \$150,000 each year, much of the project's success comes from the commitment of the many volunteers who have provided services, supplies, and equipment.

Community organization and agency assistance have developed gradually. The project coordinators have found that the best way to get others involved is to speak at various associations' meetings and to confer with agencies' leaders, asking only for specific help for a particular program. Assistance may come in the form of money, services, volunteered time, and in-kind donations such as playground equipment, sewing machines, paint, educational toys, food, clothing, and furniture.

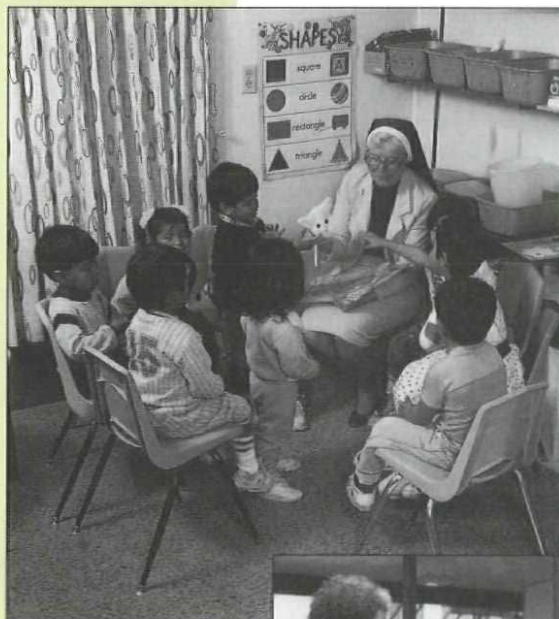
HELP FROM MANY SOURCES

A grassroots approach has been used to develop programs. "Scouts," people who go door-to-door inviting residents to participate in the Mercy Southeast project, find that only a few people respond positively at first. A month or more of patient perseverance (e.g., continuing to approach people to participate and holding a program even if only one or two people show up) is often required before the number of people attending certain programs begins to grow. Mercy Southeast project coordinators worked more than a year to develop a relationship of trust in Bakersfield's black and Hispanic communities.

Religious-sponsored Groups Through the years,

Bakersfield Catholic Charities has been a major contributor to the Mercy Southeast project. This agency provides two or three boxes of groceries each week for families served by the project. In addition, the agency donates bedding, clothing, and shoes to several families each week. It frequently helps families pay rent and utility bills and occasionally helps pay for funeral expenses. Because the families Mercy Southeast project serves are not "agency sophisticated," they may not be aware that they could obtain help from Bakersfield Catholic Charities. Project coordinators teach clients how to make the request themselves for future needs.

Three Catholic parishes in Bakersfield provide more than 100 Thanksgiving and Christmas boxes each year. Each box includes a turkey, groceries, clothing, and toys. Each year the St. Vincent DePaul Society at one parish pays a month's rent for six families. Students from Garces Catholic High School in Bakersfield have painted several houses and will continue to do so as requested. The students also throw a Christmas party for 90



Sr. Webster (above), Hispanic community project coordinator at that time, reads to a group of preschoolers. Some U.S. Postal Service employees (right) help Ann Everly (extreme right), project coordinator for the black community, load donated food into her car.



children and their parents each year.

All churches in the area's black community are Protestant but have offered space to be used for classes (e.g., parenting, food preparation, health education, and reading for the children) and other activities (e.g., food and clothing distribution and blood pressure clinics). Congregation members have volunteered to serve hot meals and pick up and deliver food, clothing, furniture, and other supplies. Some church members have had their garages converted into living quarters for the homeless; local building contractors have donated their services to make these conversions.

Community Agencies and Businesses The amount of local support given the Mercy Southeast project is truly astounding. Help has come from local service clubs, school districts, the health department, the department of human services, the police and fire departments, and local businesses, among others. Goods and services provided include house painting and repair, uniforms for the basketball teams and Mexican Cultural

The services provided by the Mercy Southeast project include legal services and healthcare.

Dancing group, books and educational supplies, space for English classes, legal services, and healthcare.

Volunteers In addition, many qualified persons have joined in the efforts of the Mercy Southeast project to improve the quality of life for those in poverty. Volunteers teach in the children's education program; work with the basketball teams in the black community; teach health classes; hold blood pressure and diabetes screenings; teach sewing; pick up and deliver groceries, clothing, and furniture; and conduct English classes for Hispanic adults.

Mercy Hospital Staff Mercy Hospital employees have provided a variety of services and materials to the project. Every Christmas, Mercy Hospital gives each employee a turkey. In 1990 more than 200 employees donated their turkeys to the needy in the project. Three Bakersfield restaurants provided freezer space so the turkeys could be kept for times when donations are fewer.

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PROGRAMS OFFERED BY THE MERCY SOUTHEAST PROJECT

The following goods and services are provided by Mercy Southeast project coordinators, community volunteers, Mercy hospital employees, and area businesses. In addition, both black and Hispanic community members can obtain blood pressure and diabetes screenings, emergency transportation, counseling, assistance in obtaining medical care, and money for needed medicines.

THE BLACK COMMUNITY

- In an open parking lot a hot meal is served each evening to 200 to 300 homeless people.
- Parenting classes are taught to mothers who live in the housing projects. Many of the mothers are single teens.
- To remove junior high school students from the drug scene, basketball teams and a soccer team have been organized. To encourage school attendance, the more than 100 children who are on the teams must maintain at least a C grade point average and have a good citizenship record. Many students' grades have improved, and almost all those who were with the pro-

gram in the beginning have completed high school and are now in college.

- Members of the black community regularly meet with police department representatives and other civic leaders to deal with the crime problem.
- Transportation is available to senior citizens on a weekly basis so that they will have an opportunity to shop. The elderly feel more secure in a high crime area when they can travel together in a minibus.
- A group of 20 to 30 men who have been in and out of prison several times and on the streets have been brought together as a labor crew for farm harvests. The program is now in its third year, and the men have remained out of prison and have their own shelter.

THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

- To reduce the number of Hispanic students who drop out of school, neighborhood educational activities are available to preschool children from Spanish-speaking families. Participants have experienced a high level of success in kindergarten. Once they begin school, afternoon tutoring classes are

available.

- Free dental care is provided for all the children in the program.
- Psychological, speech, hearing, and visual testing are arranged at no charge for children with learning problems.
- Spanish cultural dancing classes are held for children. The dancing group performs at various celebrations. This activity helps them develop motor and social skills and self-confidence.
- English classes are provided for more than 100 Spanish-speaking adults.
- Fifty senior citizens are provided with social and recreational activities such as games, parties, and bus tours. The seniors also get hot meals at the center.
- Daily distribution of food is provided for those temporarily out of work or whose income is extremely low. About 2,000 meals are provided each month.
- Regularly scheduled classes in health, parenting, nutrition, cooking, sewing, and crafts are offered to adults. Some participants in the sewing and craft classes subsidize their income by selling articles they make.

PROFILE

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Dietitians from Mercy Hospital's Food Service Department have taught cooking and nutrition classes two hours each month. Staff from Mercy's Engineering Department painted and repaired a rented house that is being used as a learning center. A group of Mercy employees held a golf tournament last year and raised \$1,500 to buy equipment and supplies for the children's educational programs. Individual employees have given food, clothing, furniture, bedding, and money. Mercy Hospital's Friends of Mercy Foundation gave \$2,500 to the Mercy Southeast project to be used for equipment, utensils, dishes, and supplies for the cooking and nutrition classes.

BREAKING THE CHAIN OF POVERTY

Project coordinators are delighted that the children's success in school—an outgrowth of various Mercy programs—has not only improved their self-esteem but has encouraged their entire families to have higher self-esteem. Several families that had been in poverty for at least two generations have now moved from dependence to self-sufficiency after participating in the programs. None of the children enrolled in the various programs have dropped out of school. All the older children who participated in the basketball teams have remained in school, and those who completed high school are now in college.

Before their involvement in Mercy's project, these children were hanging out on the streets and in parks. Their futures looked bleak. The successes seem to indicate that the chain of poverty has been broken in a few instances and weakened in many others. The coordinators of Mercy Hospital's Mercy Southeast project hope their "ounce of prevention" will continue to prove itself to be of far more worth and less expense than the "pound of cure" that might be needed if Mercy were not involved. □

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