TWO HOSPITALS REVIVE SCHOOL-BASED CARE

When County Cuts School Nurse Budget, Catholic Hospitals Mobilize to Fill the Void

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n this era of government budget cuts, the school nurse has become a luxury. Recently, the health department of St. Joseph County, IN, discontinued services to Catholic schools in its jurisdiction. The Catholic schools in South Bend and Mishawaka needed to meet state health requirements but had neither the staff nor the funding to do so. Overworked school secretaries were often called on to make medical decisions.

Concerned that children would be made more vulnerable as a result of these financial decisions, Saint Joseph's Medical Center of South Bend and St. Joseph Community Hospital of Mishawaka stepped in to fill the gap. Through the School Health Partnership, the two hospitals train volunteer nurses to provide services for about 6,000 elementary and high school students in the area.

"We were so relieved when the hospitals came forward with a solution to our problem," said Kathleen Barrett-Jones, associate superintendent of Catholic schools for the Fort Wayne-South Bend Diocese. "The principals felt so overwhelmed. At least we could go to them with a plan. They didn't have to take on this added responsibility on their own."

THE PLAN

Each hospital has assigned a coordinator to work with the school principals, who in turn recruit parents who are nurses to volunteer. The coordinators arrange for volunteers to learn how to provide vision, hearing, and scoliosis screening; report all communicable diseases; and document tuberculosis testing and influenza and hepatitis B vaccinations.

Once trained, the volunteers take on a leadership role in each school. Working with the principal and the hospital-based coordinator, the volunteer nurses schedule mandated screenings for all students to meet state deadlines. The nurses also ensure that all state reports are filed. Each nurse is responsible for assessing the school's individual needs for health education and prevention programs. These programs may be incorporated into existing curricula or they may be additions, such as health fairs and CPR training. The nurse also helps schools take more responsibility by providing first aid education, standardizing first aid kits, or writing protocols for emergencies.

The high schools have slightly different needs. Education about breast and testicular self-examination is a state requirement at the high school level. In the past, these examinations were taught by health teachers who often had no clinical training. Now the professional volunteers provide these services.

The coordinators deliver preventive health materials to each school. The printed pieces list protocols, so that schools will have guidelines to follow when a nurse is not on site. The protocols explain what to do when a child has a fever, for example, and what a rash means. Each school has the name and number of an area health professional to contact in case of an emergency.

Saint Joseph's Medical Center serves 11 schools, encompassing most of the grade schools and the two high schools in South Bend. St. Joseph Community Hospital works with eight

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Parents who are nurses have heard about the program and volunteered.

Volunteers—the Partnership's Backbone

What motivates health professionals to give of their limited time? "I just saw the need," said Deb Ketchum, RN, who volunteers at St. Matthew's Grade School in South Bend. "My children attend St. Matthew's. And when I heard about what had happened, it seemed like the natural thing to do to step in. But believe me, the school needs more than I can give. They all do."

Ketchum works as a nurse in the public school system during the day. At night and on weekends throughout the school year, she fills out the health cards needed for each St. Matthew's student's record. During her spring break she conducted vision and scoliosis screenings at the Catholic school.

Betty Green, the parish health ministry coordinator at Saint Joseph's Medical Center, also serves as the School Health Partnership coordinator. The Parish Health Ministry Program is similar to the School Health Partnership in that it trains volunteers to provide services. Green trains the parish health ministry volunteers, most of whom are not nurses, to perform health screenings and basic testing right in the churches, usually following Sunday services.

Her work with the school program is similar. She arranges for volunteer training and sees that the needs of each school are met. Recruiting the volunteers has not been a problem. In some cases, the principals know which parents are nurses and have approached them directly. Other nurses, like Ketchum, have heard about the new program and stepped forward themselves. The volunteer staff also recruits non-nurse parents to take care of the endless paperwork.

"The schools are still identifying their needs and finding out what we have to offer," said Kathy Deckers-Burrous, administrator of family and community services at Saint Joseph's Medical Center. "A lot of our existing programs, such as emergency response training, CPR, AIDS education, and babysitting training, could be tailored to a school's needs."

Superintendent Barrett-Jones sees this partnership as one that could benefit other persons, as well the students. "I really hope that the staff can also benefit from the health fairs and other planned programs," she says. "We are all learning more about health concerns, such as the benefits of fitness programs and good nutrition."

Shrinking dollars combine with a growing need for health education, testing, and treatment to challenge healthcare organizations to do more with less. But through innovative efforts like the School Health Partnership in South Bend and Mishawaka, hospitals can pursue creative ways to keep their community healthy.

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