

HSHS ST. JOHN'S HOSPITAL • MEMORIAL MEDICAL CENTER

Community health worker program earns trust to address health challenges and other needs

The Enos Park neighborhood in Springfield, Ill., drew the attention of HSHS St. John's Hospital and Memorial Medical Center when they forged a collaborative community health needs assessment in 2015.

"Access to care was identified as one of the most significant issues in our community, and Memorial and HSHS St. John's Hospital decided to take a deep dive into one geographic neighborhood to identify and address issues that prevent residents from getting the care they need to live healthy lives," says Ed Curtis, Memorial's president and CEO.

That resolve led to the creation of the Enos Park Access to Care Collaborative, a three-year program launched in 2015. The Enos Park neighborhood ranked high in unmanaged chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, mental health and pediatric asthma. Nearly half of the roughly 2,300 residents were below the federal poverty level.

Yet, Memorial stands on the southwest corner of Enos Park, and St. John's overlooks the southeast corner of the neighborhood. Close by is the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine's Center for Family Medicine, a federally qualified health center.

"If we can't do something for our own neighbors, what can we do across town or in another city?" asks Tracey Smith, director of the program.

The primary goals of the program are to improve access to health care through the efforts of community health workers, and increase access to pediatric mental health services through screening, intervention and education.

Other goals include reducing emergency department visits for non-emergent health issues and improving self-sufficiency for program participants.

"We conducted focus groups in the



Summer clubs for children aged nine to 14 include a bicycle club led by neighborhood police officers.

neighborhood," says Kim Luz, director of community outreach for HSHS St. John's and the HSHS Central Illinois Division. "We worked with the Enos Park Neighborhood Improvement Association to address identified needs."

Focus group participants said the neighborhood needed a trusted individual who could help identify health care needs and guide residents through the health care system in areas such as accessing insurance and a primary care physician.

"We established the community health worker program to go in the neighborhood and meet people in their homes, to identify not only health care needs, but also basic needs that weren't being met," Luz says.

Smith says "education or degrees are not the most important aspects of someone who is a good community health worker. The key is to find someone whose heart is in the right place."

The program reached 1,095 residents in Years 1 and 2, including 300 clients enrolled in the community health

worker program. All of those 300 clients selected a primary care home through the program. Clients needing mental health services completed 172 appointments, and there was a 22 percent reduction in unnecessary ED visits.

Overall, 38 percent of Enos Park residents had obtained greater access to care in the second year of the program.

But not all the improvements directly involve health care. For example, the Springfield Police Department reported a 22 percent reduction in Enos Park police calls in Years 1 and 2 of the program, and an 11 percent reduction in crime rates.

The program also developed summer clubs for children aged 9 to 14, including a bicycle club led by neighborhood police officers.

"The outcomes demonstrate that if you provide access to the right type of health care in the right place at the right time, it's going to contribute to wellness and a better living standard," says Charles Lucore, M.D., president and CEO of HSHS St. John's. ●