

Reach Out of Montgomery County Thrives After 5 Years of Volunteer Service

By: Mark Willis

After five years of providing free medical care in Dayton's poor and underserved neighborhoods, the volunteers who operate Reach Out of Montgomery County have learned two convincing lessons. The need for expanded access to health care for underserved people is greater now than ever before, and the volunteer commitment among physicians and other health care providers here is a significant resource that can be tapped to address that need. Reach Out's outcomes over five years underscore both lessons and have brought the program to state and national prominence.

Since Reach Out began treating patients in March 1995, the number of annual clinic visits has climbed steadily from 532 to 1,508. A total of 5,151 clinic visits were provided free to 3,362 different patients.

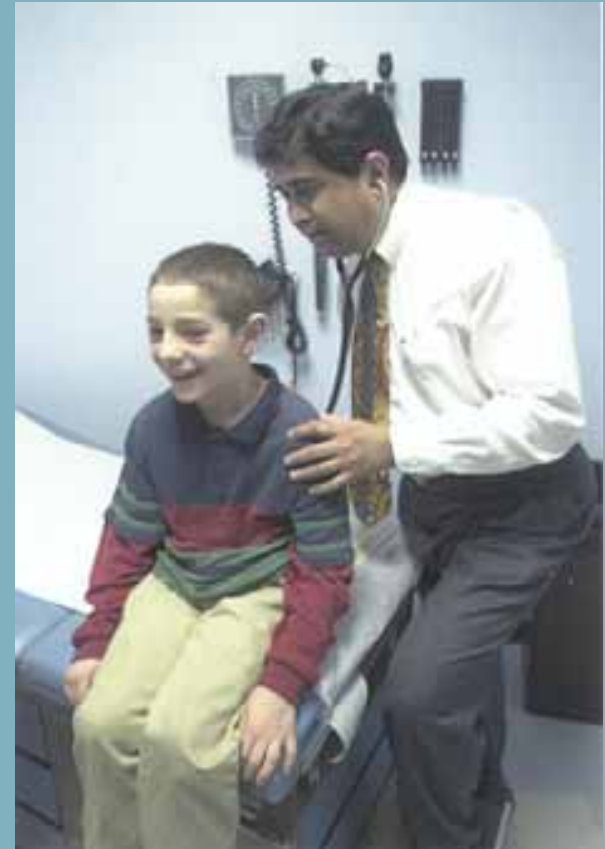
In 1999, 80 physicians and 130 others donated 2,088 hours of volunteer service to Reach Out's weekly evening clinics at the Dr. Charles R. Drew Health Center and the East Dayton Health Center. In addition to physicians, Reach Out's volunteers included registered nurses, pharmacists, social workers, Wright State medical students, and front desk and office staffers recruited from the University of Dayton and Sinclair Community College.

"I think it's in the genes of most

physicians to want to help people in need,,," says one of Reach Out's volunteers, family physician Richard T. Hoback, M.D. "You feel that you're giving something back to the community.,,"

Dr. Hoback was president of the Montgomery County Medical Society when it, the Combined Health District, and Wright State University School of Medicine organized Reach Out in 1994. Since 1995 he has set a leadership example by volunteering once a month at Reach Out clinics. His dedication to volunteerism was recognized in December at the MCMS inaugural dinner when he was presented with a special citation from the Ohio Senate. It read in part, "Willingly giving of your time, energy, and abilities, you have worked tirelessly to better the world around you.,,"

Dr. Hoback was the kind of leader the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) hoped to recruit when it launched its national Reach Out initiative to cultivate volunteer physician programs to treat the underserved. An article published in the January 5, 2000 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) describes the national



Dr. Syed Ahmed examines a young patient during Reach Out.

initiative's outcomes. The foundation provided start-up funds to Reach Out of Montgomery County and 29 other programs nationwide. The programs were funded with \$300,000 over four years. Most programs followed the free clinic and referral network model adopted by Reach Out of Montgomery County. In four years the programs enrolled 199,584 patients nationwide and recruited 11,252 volunteer physicians.

“With strong physician leadership and a funded administrative core, organized community efforts can develop and sustain an effective program,, the JAMA article concludes. “Programs such as Reach Out cannot solve the national problem of access to health care, but they can make a small but important impact on the number of uninsured and underserved persons without access to health care.,,

The RWJF expects two out of three Reach Out programs to continue with local support. Prominent among them is Reach Out of Montgomery County, which was showcased by the foundation in February at legislative events held in Washington, D.C. “The foundation thinks we have done something really remarkable in Dayton. We have shown a very positive outcome,, says Syed Ahmed, M.D., who represented Reach Out on Capitol Hill.

Reach Out of Montgomery County continues to thrive a year after RWJF funding ended, according to Dr. Ahmed. In addition to volunteering as Reach Out’s program director, he is director of the Alliance for Research in Community Health (ARCH) in Wright State’s Department of Family Medicine. Reach Out receives funding now from several local sources. “The community has bought into Reach Out and sees the value in it. That’s the reason why we’re still going,, Dr. Ahmed explains. “We’re always looking for funding, but our most valuable resource is all the time contributed by Reach Out volunteers.,,

Dr. Ahmed summarizes the lessons learned from Reach Out of Montgomery County in forthcoming articles in the American Journal of Public Health and the Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved. “Most of all I’ve learned that a strong sense of volunteerism exists in the

community, if you can provide a framework to use it effectively. Before Reach Out, we didn’t have an avenue to do that,, he says. “I do not have any illusion that volunteerism will solve the monumental problem of the uninsured and underserved, but it can still contribute as a force that overcomes some access barriers.,,

References:

Ahmed SM, Maurana CA: Reaching Out to the Underserved: A Collaborative Partnership to Provide Health Care. *Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved* 1999; 10(2): 157-168.

Scott HD, Bell J, Geller S, Thomas M: Physicians Helping Underserved. *JAMA* 2000; 283(1):99-104.

Ahmed SM, Maurana CA: Reaching Out to the Underserved: A Successful Volunteer Program. *American Journal of Public Health* 2000; 90(3): (IN PRESS)

Ahmed SM, Maurana CA, Wymyslo TE: Lessons Learned Developing a Volunteer Healthcare Program for the Underserved. *Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved* (ON REVIEW)