

Community Partnering: A Strategic Effort

BY RANDALL D. OOSTRA, D.M., FACHE, PROMEDICA

As hospitals and health systems continue to be leading economic drivers in their communities, we can—and *must*—be an agent for change to bring about awareness and actionable, positive transformation. With the depth of our resources, rooted in addressing basic needs and public health, we should serve as a convener for the community, offering resources, staff, and facilities.

Mission-based, non-profit health system ProMedica in Toledo, Ohio, operates 11 hospitals in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan. The organization is dedicated to giving back to the community and committed to expanding its outreach capacity. We partner locally, statewide, and nationally on various programs and believe it's a good investment of our time and resources.

For example, we work with 40 systems across the country—the Health Systems Learning Group convened by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships—focusing on the social determinants of health and defining healthcare's role in helping address the many challenges we all are facing around the country. We believe there is a part hospitals can—and should—play in the community that goes beyond our traditional function of acute care. We also believe that community involvement in basic social needs that affect health are at the root of a successful population health model.

When we look at social determinants such as where and how our patients live, their education level, neighborhood safety, crime rates, etc., these factors often have just as much of an impact on a person's overall health as genetics. While our organizations of course can't change a person's genetic make-up, we can play a significant role in addressing the social determinants of our community. And though we don't presume taking on these social determinants is healthcare's responsibility alone, we do believe we have a place at the table.

As a non-profit health system, ProMedica's mission is to improve the health and well-being of the community, which means

providing the resources to keep people healthy and on the right path to being productive citizens who are able to better manage their own health.

A trend we have seen, and one that many communities are experiencing, is an increasing level of obesity and its connection to hunger. Food insecurity, or an inadequate intake of food due to lack of resources, affected 15 percent—50 million people—of U.S. households in 2011, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. Minorities were disproportionately affected, with more than one in four Hispanic and black non-Hispanic households reporting food insecurity.

For those experiencing hunger, children are among the most vulnerable for many reasons, including several related to their health and well-being. Hungry children are more prone to colds, developmental delays, ear infections, and other ailments. A healthy start at life for some children is hindered by being born underweight to mothers who lacked sufficient access to nutritious food. Additionally, many seniors struggle to meet their nutritional needs and often choose between purchasing food and medications.

ProMedica's recognition of the connection between hunger and health led us to develop *Come to the Table*, a hunger-free community initiative striving to end childhood hunger by 2015. Understanding that hunger is a health issue, not simply a poverty issue, ProMedica is collaborating with other organizations and agencies to curb the problem. Last year, in conjunction with a local grocery store, its employees, and local sports teams, we held a community-wide food drive that filled an entire refrigerated truck with quality food items in six hours. This was our first public foray to raise awareness of the link between hunger and obesity.

ProMedica's commitment has led us to opportunities with various leaders nationwide. In partnership with The Alliance to End Hunger, for example, ProMedica is convening a half-day summit called *Come to the Table* on October 10, 2013, in Washington, D.C. The summit aims to bring together U.S. healthcare executives, providers,

elected officials, Obama administration representatives, and others to broaden the dialogue. The call to action is for healthcare organizations to discuss ways in which to best address hunger as a health issue and for government officials to protect food-related policies and programs.

Speakers for the summit include leaders from several partner organizations equally committed to ending hunger and improving healthcare nationwide: Share Our Strength, The Alliance to End Hunger, Bread for the World, the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease, Children's Health-Watch, and Meals on Wheels Association of America.

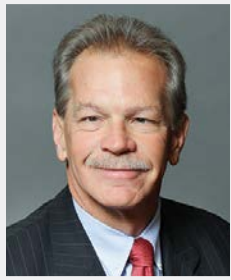
Another successful program ProMedica has initiated is working with large food-service operations, including several of our own hospitals, to repackage prepared but unserved food for distribution to homeless shelters and other communal feeding sites. Since the program's inception earlier this year, we have reclaimed more than 30,000 pounds of food that would have otherwise gone to waste.

We have also started to screen patients for hunger and food insecurity so we can discharge those in need with an emergency supply and help connect them to community resources for further assistance. We're working with other community partners throughout our region, including local government leaders, school systems, food banks, the YMCA, United Way, soup kitchens, shelters, grocery stores, other businesses, and the faith-based community. Through our efforts in partnership with community groups, we firmly believe we can end hunger in our region.

While hunger is a critical issue, unfortunately it has not been a significant priority for many healthcare leaders and board members. But it makes sense for it to be because when people become obese they are not managing their diet and for many they don't have access to nutritious foods. The unfortunate—and costly—result is these health issues spiral out of control and, ultimately, the price is felt in the healthcare industry. If we take care of people's basic needs at the beginning, these conditions are less likely to become exacerbated.

As ProMedica continues to work with our community partners, and employees

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and physicians, tackling major issues such as obesity and hunger, we understand the importance of tracking the success of our programs so that we can determine the correct path to take. We are in new territory, and we're fortunate to have a board of directors who is supportive and, indeed, pushes us to do more to the benefit of the community.

Obesity is now officially recognized as a disease by the American Medical

Association, and hunger poses a national health threat that could—and in many cases has—lead to a crisis. Instead of perceiving the hungry only through images of those with distended bellies in third world countries, we must alter our understanding of hunger and how it affects us all, individuals and caregivers alike. As we continue to collaborate with partners and shape the strategies and course for population health, we must work aggressively to better

understand and address the social determinants in each of our communities. After all, this is true population health. ●

The Governance Institute thanks Randall D. Oostra, D.M., FACHE, president and CEO of ProMedica in Toledo, Ohio, for contributing this article. He can be reached at randy.oostra@promedica.org.