

On the Road for Children's Health

BY ELEANOR FOA DIENSTAG

On a bright spring morning, Heather, a preschool teacher, is filling out forms outside a cheerfully painted RV parked in front of Worthington Elementary School in the community of Inglewood. Her youngest son, Dylan, is in need of medical care. "Dylan just turned four and hasn't seen a doctor in a couple of years," says Heather. "Some things happened in my life that left me without health insurance, so we're getting caught up on all of his immunizations and filling out the medical history forms, so he can go to school."

The RV is actually a custom-built state-of-the-art mobile medical unit, and Dylan is the first patient of the day for the bilingual medical team of health and social service professionals that brings no-cost primary care to areas of the city where children and adults have the poorest health conditions and the greatest difficulty in accessing care.

The nurses and social workers taking care of Dylan and helping Heather find a clinic that will serve her own medical needs are part of Cedars-Sinai's acclaimed COACH (Community Outreach Assistance for Children's Health) for Kids and Their Families® Program. Launched in 1994, it is recognized as one of the most effective community-benefit programs in Los Angeles. Cedars-Sinai picks up 50 percent of the program's costs; the balance comes from support groups and foundations.

Since 2000, the California Community Foundation (CCF) has been a key COACH partner. Most recently, through its Centinela Medical Care Fund, CCF provided a \$750,000 three-year grant to expand the scope of COACH's services and add new community sites in South Los Angeles, including Inglewood and Lennox.

According to Tamu Jones, program officer for health-care at CCF, for families without health insurance the situation in Los Angeles has gotten progressively worse. Jones calls it, "A perfect storm of recent economic downturns, budget deficits, and health policy failures."

"Community clinics are operating at or beyond their actual capacity. Our safety net is frayed and strained. We're seeing the continued erosion of health services in the region, which makes access a challenge for people who are uninsured, or in a low income bracket, or underserved. Given this situation, CCF is excited to support COACH because it brings critically needed services to where people are. It gives them the tools to navigate the system."



PHOTOS BY RICK NAHMIA



Left: COACH staff members (from left to right): Cindy Sanchez, Maribet Rivera, MPH, RD, Daniela Lopez (seated), Jill Zappia, RDH, Eden L. Goldberg, LaMont Harrington, Marta Pavlicek, RN (seated), Georgina De la Torre, MA, Anne Traynor, RN, CFNP
Opposite: Donald Washington, COACH operator, takes a child's blood pressure at Pueblo Del Rio Housing Project.

It also offers strong prevention programs—efforts that control diseases, such as diabetes, that disproportionately impact communities in South Los Angeles.”

Founded in 1915, the California Community Foundation (calfund.org) is one of the leading philanthropic organizations in Los Angeles County, managing more than \$1 billion in assets. Each year, it gives out more than \$100 million in grants to invest in the future of local communities. The foundation partners with individual donors and actively supports nonprofit organizations to address the diverse and dynamic needs of the region. The expertise and commitment of CCF enables individuals, families, and organizations to fulfill their charitable goals and dreams.

Michele Rigsby Pauley, RN, CPNP, manages COACH for Kids. She started out as the program's first pediatric nurse practitioner. Today, she wears many hats, among them, chief fund-raiser and director of clinical services. A charismatic woman with a seemingly endless reserve of energy, she recalls her rude awakening the day the first COACH team rolled out to its initial site on skid row. “We thought we were just going to give shots and take care of colds. Then we realized that families had a whole lot of other issues. For example, a young mom brought in her infant with an upper respiratory infection. I gave my usual instructions for over-the-counter medications. But she didn't have the money to buy them. Then I told her to take her baby into the bathroom and let the shower run so that the steam would relieve the baby's congestion. But she was living in a skid row hotel and didn't have a bathroom. I had no idea how poor and underserved our patients really were.” Shortly thereafter, Michele and her team started stocking well over

100 different prescription and over-the-counter medications supplied by Cedars-Sinai's Pharmacy Department.

COACH has been adding services ever since, including a strong case management program and a mental health unit. And thanks to its affiliation with the Children's Health Fund, all medical information is recorded on an Electronic Health Record System which assures continuity of care for patients and tracks valuable medical data. “We can generate reports that tell us how many kids in a zip code have asthma,” notes Rigsby Pauley, “which helps us better plan our program as well as get grants.” In 2003, thanks to CCF, COACH hired a full-time dental hygienist and started its “Healthy Smiles” program, which complements COACH's other primary medical care services. “Entrée into the system is through healthcare,” says Rigsby Pauley, “but we use our resources to connect families to other resources so they can get the care they need. We're not just creating healthy children; we're trying to create healthy families.”

“Michele is fantastic,” says Jones. “She has a passion for what she's doing, a real heart for the community, and a real understanding of the barriers to health that exist.”

COACH has come a long way in 14 years. “We've provided over 200,000 patient visits,” says Rigsby Pauley, “added a second mobile medical unit in 2001, and have built an incredible staff.”

“Cedars-Sinai is extremely proud of COACH,” says Mark Gavens, senior vice president for clinical care services at Cedars-Sinai. “We continue to need outside underwriting because of the cost to run such a program and because of the need out in the community. It's overwhelming.” However, as Gavens points out, “We're also getting something back. Every person in the COACH program is a role model, and presents a very positive image of healthcare professionals to kids, parents, and teachers. We hope it will inspire some of them to become clinical nurses and social workers themselves, and help us build the health workforce of the future.”

Dylan bounces out of the COACH mobile medical unit with a shy smile on his face. Yesterday he got a haircut. Today he got his shots and a checkup. Tomorrow, papers in hand, he will start his first day of school. ■