

REACHING INTO THE COMMUNITY TO IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH

MEMBERS IN ACTION CASE STUDY

Norwegian American Hospital | Chicago, Ill.

Overview

A 200-bed acute-care facility, Norwegian American Hospital is situated in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, an immigrant community with a large Puerto Rican and South American population. Overall, Norwegian American's patients have been largely underserved by health care and social services. Thus, as a community-based hospital, Norwegian American reinvests back into the neighborhood through programs, initiatives and outreach to serve low-income residents and the uninsured.

One area of focus has been maternal health. For several years, Norwegian American has collaborated with Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago to provide specialized care to expectant mothers.

Twice per week, Northwestern provides a maternal fetal medicine specialist to consult with Norwegian American's patients. Recognizing that attending routine prenatal appointments can be difficult for women who are coping with the many issues associated with poverty, Norwegian American provides vans that hold up to 15 people and travel within a 15-mile radius to ensure expectant mothers can keep their appointments. The

hospital also offers "whole family" appointments and builds flexibility into appointment schedules to accommodate patients who may be late or need to change their appointment time. "This type of flexibility makes it less likely that patients will cancel or not show up to their appointments," says Susan Wucka, director of Women & Children's Services at Norwegian American. "Before we discharge our patients, we

make follow-up appointments for them so that they don't have to navigate the system themselves and so that they know who they will see the next time they come in."



Susan Wucka, director of Women & Children's Services, Norwegian American Hospital, and Ramon Barajas, M.D., chair of the Obstetrics/Gynecology Department, Norwegian American, oversee hospital programs, initiatives and outreach to improve the lives of low-income and uninsured residents in the community the hospital serves.

In addition to facilitating transportation services to appointments, Norwegian American sponsors a "Care-A-Van," which is a fully equipped, mobile health clinic that provides no-cost, preventive health services within the

community. Most of the people who seek treatment from the Care-A-Van face barriers to receiving basic care, and nearly all are low-income. In the areas of women's health, the Care-A-Van offers sexual/reproductive health education, pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing, birth control counseling, and condom/contraceptive distribution.

More recently, Norwegian American has launched a mobile app called “My Own Doctor.” The app offers a convenient way for expectant mothers to access prenatal care without having to visit the hospital. “Although we offer prenatal classes at the hospital, the turnout is usually rather low,” says Wucka. “But through My Own Doc, we offer virtual prenatal classes twice per month in Spanish and English, focusing on the really important aspects of pregnancy.”

Impact

Aggregating accurate, long-term data has been challenging for Norwegian American. Its population can be difficult to maintain consistent contact with, partially because many patients are transient or change phone numbers frequently when they cannot afford to pay their phone bills. In late 2017, Humboldt Park experienced an influx of residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Dominica. “Shortly after Hurricane Maria when we had a surge of new patients, our rates of syphilis skyrocketed,” says Ramon Barajas, M.D., chair of the Obstetrics/Gynecology Department at Norwegian American. In addition to initiating community outreach, such as free testing, for patients who present to the hospital, all STD testing is now conducted in-house so that results can be shared with patients before they even leave the hospital, thus ensuring they leave with knowledge about their condition. “Our rates are down somewhat from what they were during the 6 months after Hurricane Maria,” says Barajas. “It’s difficult to know if people who we’ve treated have left the neighborhood, but we believe our efforts in the community are starting to pay off.”

Lessons Learned

Thinking differently has been critical to Norwegian American’s approach to serving its community. “Our work can be discouraging when patients move from one hospital or provider to another,” says Wucka. “Because it’s so difficult to achieve continuity in patient care, ‘cookbook medicine’ does not work in this environment. We are constantly searching for innovative ways to educate our patients and then have them translate that education into action.”


Future Goals

Norwegian American hopes to attract more providers so that it can extend its services and create a larger presence in the community. Its clinics are being renovated with more rooms and better equipment. Although some of the issues Norwegian American faces are pervasive, both Barajas and Wucka believe that the hospital’s provision of high-quality, safe care, as well as increased education within the neighborhood, will ultimately help create a healthier environment.

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