

*Foster G. McGaw Prize winner Kaweah Delta Health Care District confronts enormous challenges in building a wide-ranging community health program*

# Breathing LIFE Into a Troubled Valley

ARTICLE BY  
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**A** week after heart bypass surgery, Dick Avery says, "I couldn't have cared less if I lived or died. I was ready to die and didn't give a hoot."

Twelve weeks into his cardiac rehabilitation program at the Lifestyle Center in Visalia, Calif., 73-year-old Avery was exercising so vigorously he'd become an inspiration to other patients—like Darrell Crabtree, 46, who started rehab after getting a pacemaker. "I would like to get back in shape and back to work," says Crabtree, who suffers from congestive heart failure. "You look around and see everyone else going great, and you try to match them."

Asked what the program means to him, Avery says, "In one word: life."

For more than a quarter of a century, the Kaweah Delta Health Care District, which runs the Lifestyle Center, has been breathing life into Visalia, a struggling agricultural community in California's Central Valley, and its environs. For many, especially the Latino immigrants who come to work the fields, hope is elusive; but they managed to find it among the 82 programs initiated in partnerships by the district to improve health care and the overall quality of life for the area's 100,000 residents.

For its work, the district earned this year's Foster G. McGaw Prize, a \$75,000 community service award sponsored by the Baxter Allegiance Foundation, Deerfield, Ill., and the American Hospital Association.

## A COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

Of the hospital's \$154 million annual budget, \$5.8 million goes into a variety of community programs, among them:

**The Lifestyle Center**, which promotes wellness and self-improvement through fitness, education and rehabilitation in a 55,000-square-foot complex that opened in 1995. The center serves nearly 9,000 Visalia residents—many of them referred by physicians—and offers free membership to select low-income residents.

**Youth Connect**, a pregnancy-prevention program for adolescents in grades six through 12. The program focuses on prevention and on opportunities that will help teenagers make responsible choices.

**HEART** (Homework, Enrichment, Acceleration, Recreation and Teamwork), designed to get youngsters into homework, sports and cultural programs. Begun in the early 1990s as an



anti-gang measure, the program uses such games as Scrabble and Yahtzee to improve reading and math skills. As a result, 76 percent of the teachers in the district report that their students are finishing their homework and that their self-esteem has improved.

**The Mobile Dental Project**, in which interns from the University of Southern California School of Dentistry set up shop at one of the schools each year to treat tooth decay problems among low-income elementary schoolchildren. Since 1996, dental work has been completed on 240 Medicaid and 600 uninsured children.

**Parents Helping Parents**, a program designed by Sister Ines Telles of Soledad Enrichment Action of Los Angeles to help parents become more effective in dealing with their children and to develop healthy family relationships.

**Good News Clinic**, a soup-to-nuts operation that includes a kitchen, health clinic, battered-women's shelter and thrift store founded by the Daughters of Charity. When the nuns began feeding the homeless and low-income residents in 1987, they noticed health problems and turned to the district for help. The clinic was built in 1992, and today treats 4,000 people a year, hosts a "women's day" once a week and refers patients to local surgeons at no charge.

The heart of the Good News Clinic is people like Rita Perez, who's been preparing meals in the kitchen for 15 years and feeds up to 200 people a day. After the carpet company she worked for shut down, Perez heard that Good News was looking for someone to help in the kitchen. She offered to cook despite one minor obstacle: she didn't know how. After feeding 80 people her first day, "you learn fast," she says.

Doors open at 11 a.m., and as the homeless line up, Perez is there to greet them. "You've come to the right place," she tells them even after the doors close at 1:30 p.m. "I always have something left over."

## A CHALLENGING AREA

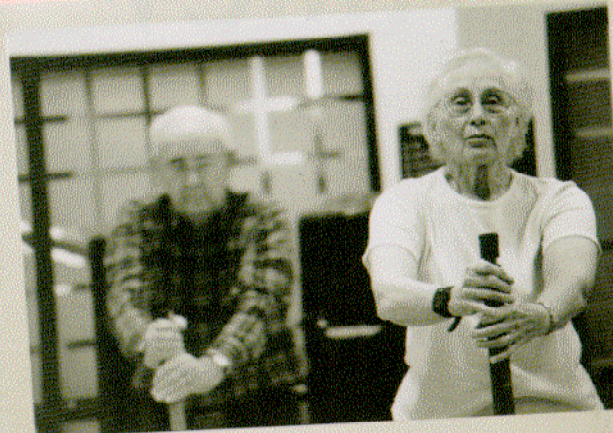
Visalia is in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley, where agriculture dominates the economy. Because of the seasonal nature of the work, unemployment averages a much higher rate than elsewhere in California—almost 16 percent compared with the statewide average of 6 percent. Thirty-eight percent of the area's children live in



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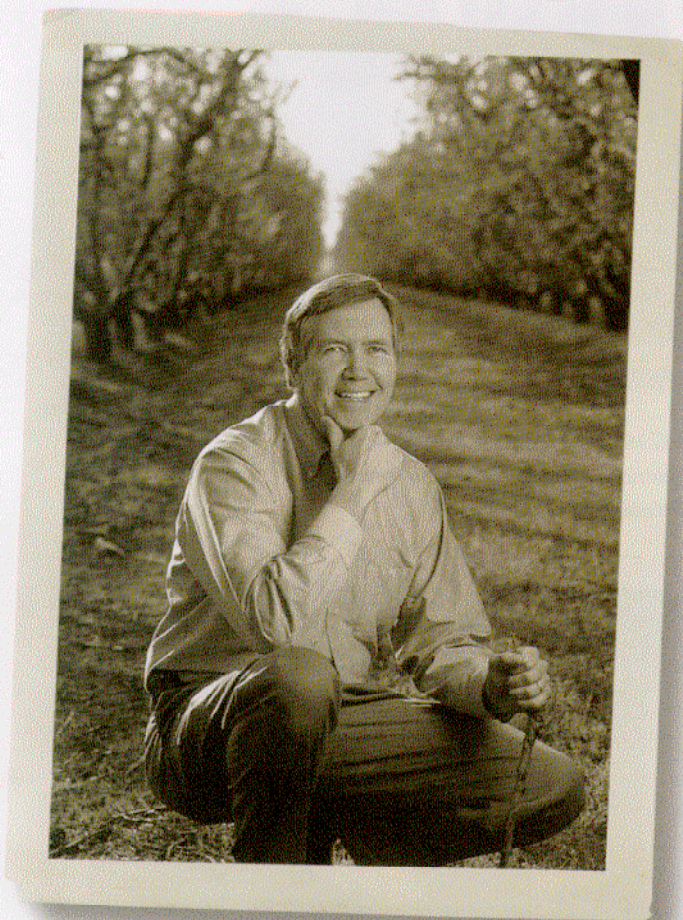


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poverty compared with the national average of 20 percent. Thirty-six percent of the population, most undocumented farm workers, don't speak English. "There are so many needs. It's enormous," says Tom Johnson, Kaweah Delta CEO, from his office in Kaweah Delta Hospital, one of five hospitals run by the district. "It's a challenging area."

The valley has the highest rate of medically uninsured in the state. Lack of access to health care and lack of education also account for unusually high rates of diabetes, heart disease and strokes, Johnson says. To make matters worse, the district has a tough time attracting doctors because of the low rate of reimbursements for Medi-Cal and Medicare.

"The lack of medical sophistication by the population hasn't made them very demanding consumers, which has artificially lowered the cost base that Medi-Cal and Medicare use for reimbursement," Johnson says. In addition, the area has one of the lowest employer-based insurance rates in the state. "It's a great place to live, but you're not going to get paid much and you will work hard," he says.

None of which has stopped Kaweah Delta from its commitment—a commitment it didn't have to honor. In 1994, the state legislature passed a law requiring all private not-for-profit California hospitals to develop an annual community benefit plan. As a public health care district, Kaweah Delta was exempt, but, Johnson says, "We wanted to do what the other hospitals were doing." Kaweah leaders also realized that "it used to be that it was enough for us to take care of people within our hospital," he says. "Not any more. We now realize that our mission is to build a healthy community?"

## SETTING PRIORITIES

A catalyst was former Mayor Mary Louise Vivier, who formed a task force to address some of the area's pressing issues: gang violence, teen pregnancy and poor parenting. Out of that grew many of the programs for which the Kaweah Delta Health Care District earned the Foster G. McGaw Prize.

Teen pregnancy was particularly pressing. "Poverty brings a lot of problems, a sense of hopelessness, low self-esteem and the need to be wanted, all of which result in bad lifestyle choices," Johnson says. The teen pregnancy prevention program works because "we don't just tell the kids not to have sex or how to use condoms, but we emphasize that by not having a child as a teenager, it keeps the door to their future open." Since the program was launched, the pregnancy rate has fallen 10 percent in the eastern Visalia community



of Woodlake and similar reductions are reported in Exeter.

Jerry Lopez, 31, who grew up in the community, runs the program and serves as an example for the youngsters. He stresses the importance of education as the path to opportunity, telling them, "School is the easiest job you're going to have." As part of the program, teen actors from the community perform skits encouraging seventh- and eighth-graders to be careful about the choices they make. Lopez hopes agencies and the district will keep the program going when funding ends in June.

### VARIED NEED, VARIED HELP

Responsibility is also key to Parents Helping Parents, begun in 1997 in partnership with the Visalia Unified School District's Healthy Start program. So far, more than 130 parents, teachers and personnel from various agencies have been trained to teach the program, which is now offered in Spanish and English. Parents are recruited from the Migrant Education Program to teach classes in their own communities. In all, 29 classes are held each week throughout the area.

Some parents voluntarily seek help; others are referred by the courts. Preliminary studies by the county probation department indicate that parents attending classes are 65 percent less likely to run into problems again than parents who do not attend. "It's been so successful, it's now used throughout the county's mental health agencies," said Kathy Oldershaw, acting community outreach director.

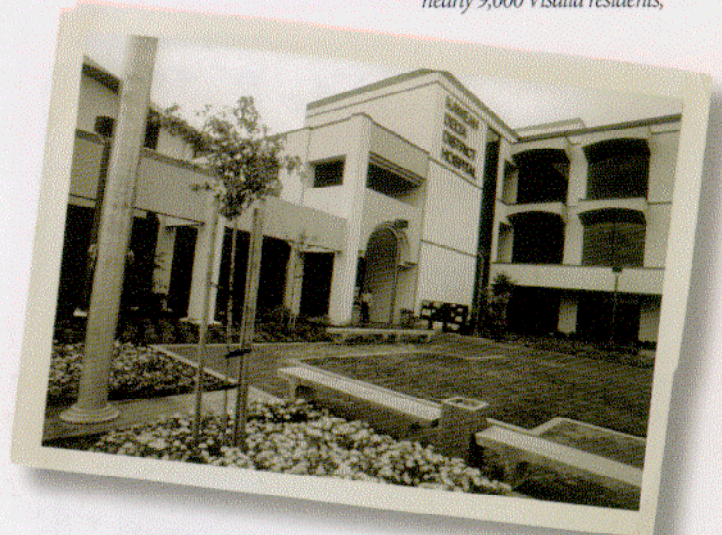
Oldershaw also oversees the Mobile Dental Clinic, which draws an average of 120 youngsters every May. One unexpected byproduct of the program: a decline in school absenteeism. "Teachers have noticed that youngsters feel better about themselves," Oldershaw says.

Kaweah tries to make sure its outreach encompasses all sectors of the community. For instance, the Lifestyle Center has become so integral to the community that 10 percent of the local population uses it regularly. That includes 100 developmentally disabled residents from area group homes who are being mainstreamed through the program. Before beginning an exercise program at the center last year, some of them could barely walk. Now, said medical director Ron Marconi, M.D., "they're getting ready at 10 in the morning to get here by 2. They just love to come here." That's a sentiment echoed throughout the community, where Kaweah's many programs inspire hope in those who need it most. ●

*Leonard Novarro is a freelance writer based in San Diego.*



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*Foster G. McGaw Prize winner Kaweah Delta Health Care District shows that knowing your communities' needs is essential for healthy partnering.*



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