



Physicians and staff from the McCart Neighborhood Clinic gather together outside their clinic to demonstrate their promise to patients.

# Pulling Together for the Children

## Cook Children's Health Care System Receives the 2011 Excellence in Community Service Award

By Terri Schexnayder

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. In Tarrant County, Cook Children's Health Care System has shown a long-standing commitment to this idea through its promise to improve the health of every child in its region through the prevention and treatment of illness, disease and injury. In particular, Cook Children's recognizes that the most important thing a community can do for its children is to provide a medical home for every child.

In 2007, then-Fort Worth Mayor Mike Moncrief engaged Cook Children's to help identify and address the health needs of more than 1,000 homeless

children in Tarrant County. As part of Fort Worth's "Directions Home" initiative, Cook Children's leadership joined 21 other community leaders to tour and learn from successful programs in three other cities. It quickly became apparent that the system's neighborhood clinics could be part of the solution for an increasingly troublesome problem. Today, the Cook Children's neighborhood clinics serve as a medical home for underserved and homeless children.

In recognition of the system's accomplishments, the Texas Hospital Association has honored Cook Children's with the 2011 Excellence in Community

Service Award. The award will be presented Feb. 2 at the THA 2012 Annual Conference and Expo in Austin.

### Good Business and Good Policy

At the start of the initiative, the situation was bleak. Research from the National Center on Family Homelessness produced a sobering picture for homeless children across the United States: They get sick twice as often and have more mental problems than other children, and they lack access to primary health care. Local studies showed that 90 percent of health care sought for children in home-

less shelters was by way of Cook Children's emergency department or urgent care center, resulting in more costly treatments. The cost of uninsured or underinsured children also can be measured by missed school days and the emotional and financial stress placed upon parents, who miss work to spend hours in the emergency room.

In addition to lack of insurance, common obstacles to primary care include transportation challenges, limited knowledge about the benefit and nature of preventive care, and intimidation of clinical environments.

President and Chief Executive Officer Rick Merrill shared his unique vision for improved child health care.

“To use an analogy, as health care providers we oftentimes sit on the side of the river pulling out drowning patients, resuscitating them and sending them on their way,” Merrill said. “Through our promise, Cook Children’s is going upstream to better understand why our patients are falling in the river. Through our neighborhood clinics, as well as our outreach and education efforts, we are helping

help the homeless children at its neighborhood clinics. Everyone among Cook Children’s staff – physicians, nurses, social workers, case managers, community health outreach staff and marketing staff – was committed to ensuring the project ran efficiently and successfully and spreading the word in the community.

Through the program, Cook Children’s is breaking the pattern of treating children on an emergency basis by introducing preventive care for every child. As an integrated health care system, Cook Children’s is uniquely positioned to deliver comprehensive pediatric health care to underserved and homeless children in need of immunizations, wellness checks and other primary or specialty care designed to keep them healthy and out of the hospital while establishing a new medical home for the children and their families.

The program has made a real impact in people’s lives. One parent of a 4-year-old and 2-month-old said, “My children are patients at this clinic, and I would just like to say I appreciate the good work that you all do here from the receptionist to the doctors. Thanks a bunch for being kind, considerate and helping people.” Another parent said, “I think that the services [Cook Children’s] offers are really awesome. When my son had to go to [Cook Children’s] for various things, they were informative and friendly. The nurses and doctors were very



Maria del Pilar Levy, M.D., provides care for a patient at one of Cook Children’s Health Care System’s neighborhood clinics.

to keep children from falling in the river to begin with. This is good business, good public policy and good government.”

### Measuring Success in Child Wellness

Merrill guided his leadership team with a simple edict: “Treat these children like they are members of your own family.” Through strategic collaborations with local organizations, including the Tarrant County Homeless Coalition, the Women’s Center of Tarrant County, Tarrant County Public Health and JPS Health Network, Cook Children’s designed a health care program to

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kind, and they are on top of everything.”

Additional results achieved between March 2008 and June 2011 include:

- **Primary care provided to 595 children through 1,380 patient encounters at three neighborhood clinics;**
- **More than 650 medical referrals provided for dental, vision, behavioral health and other services;**
- **The use of neighborhood clinics as a medical home by 179 children after leaving shelters;**
- **Some 601 children served by a social work case manager, providing 2,032 interventions;**
- **Some 1,102 children served by an RN case manager, providing 5,049 health-related interventions; and**
- **Van transportation donated by Cook Children’s Women’s Board provided to 3,699 patient and family members to a neighborhood clinic.**

Due to the program’s overwhelming success, Mayor Moncrief recognized Cook Children’s during two annual “State of the City” addresses. The program now is an integral part of Tarrant County’s health care for the homeless plan.

### Serving Patients and Physicians

Ryan Champlin, vice president of operations at Cook Children’s

Physicians Network, has witnessed the growth of the neighborhood clinics over the last 11 years as they’ve gone from portable buildings to five permanent, state-of-the-art facilities. This success, Champlin noted, stemmed from not only listening to the local community and its health care needs, but also adhering to a sound business model.

“The model ensures that physicians working in the neighborhood clinics make what private practice physicians make. Physicians shouldn’t have to choose between the mission and earning a living,” Champlin said.

Pediatrician Vanessa Charette, M.D., who moved from Cook Children’s Medical Center to McCart Neighborhood Clinic almost four years ago, is one physician who has benefited from this business model.

“I always thought working in the hospital was my dream job until I moved to the neighborhood clinic. Here, I’ve watched the children grow up. I have been with many since they were babies,” Charette said. “The families tell us how much they like us and how much we have helped them.”

The children appreciate the clinics as much as their parents. As one 10-year-old boy put it, “They don’t fail you. They don’t give up on you.” ★