

Financing Good Health

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation wants to help residents stay out of the doctor's office. In 2007, it handed out \$8.2 million in grants locally

By Mike Costanza

A Rochester foundation reaches deep to help those in the region stay healthy. "Our focus really is on helping people stay out of the health care system in the first place," said John Urban, President of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. "We have the funds that will enable us to fund activities which we believe over the long term will positively impact health care in Rochester."

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation (GRHF) was born in early 2006 as a result of the merger of two not-for-profit health insurers, Rochester-based Preferred Care and MVP Health Care of Schenectady. Proceeds from the merger came to \$200 million, which by law had to remain in the not-for-profit realm. Urban said that Preferred Care's board of directors used the cash to create and fund GRHF as a means of helping those living in the region remain or become healthy.

"This is really carrying forward the original mission of the founders of Preferred Care," said Urban, who was CEO of Preferred Care at the time. "They [the board members] saw this simply as the next generation of a way to be impactful."

In 2007, GRHF handed out \$8.2 million in grants locally, including \$6.1 million in relatively small, one-shot opportunity grants that went to 26 local organizations. Though most of them were health care providers, others had nothing to do with medicine.



Urban

"We don't think that the health care system, as people commonly think of it, is typically focused on how you keep people healthy in the first place," Urban said. The Brockport School District, for example, was given just over \$150,000 for equipment for its fitness center in 2007, and the Urban League of Rochester \$215,000 for a health and family wellness program.

Much larger grants are going to long-term, tightly-focused programs that fall into three categories: preventing poor health, raising the general level of health amongst the residents of entire neighborhoods, or improving the region's health care system.

In what may be the most ambitious of its preventive efforts, GRHF is spearheading an intensive 10-year attack on childhood obesity in Monroe County.

"We have established, and are in the process of implementing, a community wide strategy to combat childhood obesity," Urban said.

The problem has serious implications for the community as a whole. A study by a GRHF task force found that 15 percent of Monroe County's children between the ages of 2 and 10 years old are overweight or obese, as measured by Body Mass Index. Unchanged, the condition can lead to a host of medical problems, including diabetes, heart disease, cancer, asthma and arthritis.

GRHF's task force, which included

representatives of the University of Rochester Medical Center department of pediatrics and the YMCA of Greater Rochester, subsequently approved a strategic plan to tackle the problem. Through funding programs that help kids become more physically active and improve their nutrition and through other measures, the foundation hopes to reduce the percentage of overweight or obese kids in the county to 5 percent by 2017.

Urban said the foundation plans to give up to \$2 million a year to the fight, at least in the beginning. As the effort focuses on older children, that amount should rise. "By the time childhood obesity is ramped-up, we'll be spending about \$5 million a year on that," he said.

Andrew Doniger, director of the Monroe County Department of Public Health, said GRHF's financial support would be welcome to the community.

"We don't have resources, though, that are dedicated to the interventions to prevent obesity," said Doniger, who heads the GRHF task force. "It has not been part of the traditional funding streams for public health."

GRHF has also committed to eliminating lead poisoning amongst Rochester's children by 2010, according to Urban. The \$2 million in grants that the foundation has earmarked for the task over three years includes more than \$1.5 million to be given to the City of Rochester. The money is to be used to help some city property owners pay for repairs needed to reduce exposure to lead through deteriorating paint. Rochester's program targets the 14621 zip code, one area in that has shown a high rate of child lead exposure.

The foundation is reaching into city neighborhoods in other ways, as well.

In June, GRHF announced the provision of \$325,000 in grants for neighborhood health status improvement.

Urban said that four non-profit community organizations that serve some of Rochester's poorer communities and one in Dundee, NY, have been given grants of \$65,000 to fund the first step in an effort to improve the general health of their areas' residents.



Dalton

"The first part of this effort will be engaging with the residents of the identified neighborhood, and having them say 'Here are the things that are most important to them,'" Urban said. As such, the three-stage project reaches far beyond the boundaries of traditional health care, starting with the surveys the non-profits are slated to conduct in their areas.

"Health is defined in a much broader sense," said Meredith Dalton, development, marketing and special projects coordinator for the Anthony L. Jordan Health Center in Rochester, one of the five organizations involved. "It's not just defined by your access to health care."

Jordan Health began the project in June by bringing together several neighborhood nonprofits that serve its

area. "This is strictly a grass roots effort," Dalton said.

The organizations picked a 13-block section of Jordan's service area, and began recruiting residents—adults and youths—to survey those living on their blocks in return for stipends. Dalton said that the survey would cover a variety of issues that can affect residents' health, including the safety of the area, their access to transportation, and the condition of their housing. It would also take into account the personal assets of residents, as well as those of their community—its churches, neighborhood organizations, and other positive elements. Finally, the survey process itself would draw assets to the area, by bringing in small amounts of cash through the stipends and helping the residents learn how to be community organizers.

"We actually chose to invest in the community," Dalton said. The raw survey results are slated to be in by the end of the summer, and the final report in April of 2009.

Dalton said that in phase two of the project, the participants would develop an asset-based plan for improving the health status of the area. In phase three, the participants would devise ways of making the positive changes they'd helped bring about sustainable. She said that each phase of the project would take about a year, with GRHF funding slated to grow to about \$1 million in the third phase.

As a third major focus, GRHF is helping to bring about improvements to the Rochester region's health care system, according to Urban. Grants totaling \$377,000 helped get the Greater Rochester Regional Health Information Organization (Rochester RHIO) up and running.

"There, our focus is on a combination of quality improvement and assisting in the deployment of electronic medical records," Urban said.

Using software and telephone lines, Rochester RHIO has linked five local medical practices local major medical labs, allowing the practices to receive medical test results practically at the click of a computer mouse. Participating physicians are also able to "e-prescribe," sending prescriptions to pharmacies by electronic means. The non profit's medical information exchange system could eventually allow physicians, medical labs, insurance companies, and even emergency medical services in the nine-county region to easily send and receive medical information.

"That helps both on the quality of treatment, but also on the efficiency of the whole health system," said Ted Kremer, executive director of Rochester RHIO.

Though GRHF provides the funding integral to all of the projects it supports, Urban insists its relationship with those it funds is symbiotic.

"We can only be as effective as the programs that various other organizations develop or promote," he said. "We are really dependent on them to actually execute the kinds of things we're looking to fund."