

The Value of Health Equity

THE CHRISTIANA CARE WAY is to “serve our neighbors as respectful, expert, caring partners in their health. We do this by creating innovative, effective, affordable systems of care that our neighbors value.”

The Way is Christiana Care’s touchstone. One of the best ways to understand our mission of service and value is through the neighbors in our community who experience it, like 70-year-old Irlene Roane.

Recently, Irlene visited St. Patrick’s Center in Wilmington, located in the state’s lowest income ZIP code. St. Pat’s offers food, clothing and other essentials for people experiencing homelessness.

Irlene sought nourishment and warmth but had other concerns on her mind. Alzheimer’s disease runs in her family, and Irlene was worried she might be at risk. That day, Christiana Care’s Swank Memory Care Center experts were at St. Pat’s for a health fair. They tested Irlene on-the-spot for memory loss. (She tested fine!)

Through a longtime partnership between Christiana Care and St. Pat’s, Christiana Care social workers embed at the center five days a week, year round to connect people with housing, transportation, financial assistance and medical and behavioral health care.

Our relationship with St. Pat’s grew out of many cold winter nights when people with nowhere else to go went to Wilmington Hospital Emergency Department seeking help. Most didn’t require emergency medical care—they needed assistance with shelter, food and clothing.

We knew that to fulfill our value promise we had to address basic needs and barriers to good health—poverty, food insecurity, inadequate housing and homelessness—before people even got to the Emergency Department. Partnering with St. Pat’s is one solution.

Christiana Care is working to build health equity, which the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation defines as meaning that “everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthier” and that we work to address “obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences.”

Non-clinical conditions that influence health and well-being such as income, education, occupation, race and ethnicity, housing and environ-



ment are known as “social determinants of health” —and their impact is powerful.

A 2012 State of Delaware Community Health Status Assessment by the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) finds “quality of life and health status are intrinsically linked to economic, income and educational attainment of Delaware residents.”

Data from a 2015 DHSS Health Equity Guide support this finding:

Children in poor families are four times more likely to be in less than optimal health than children in higher-income families. Infant mortality rates for babies born to mothers with 12 years or fewer of schooling are double the rate for babies born to women with 16 years or more of schooling.

Non-high school graduate adults are more than twice as likely as college graduates to be in less than very good health. Hispanic and non-Hispanic black adults are approximately 30 percent more likely than non-Hispanic white adults to be in less than very good health.

Delaware isn’t alone. In 2015, the Kaiser Family Foundation presented a meta-analysis of 50 studies of the impacts these determinants have on health outcomes in the U.S. Among the findings: social determinants account for more than a third of total deaths annually; the likelihood of premature death increases as income decreases; lower education levels correlate with shorter life expectancy; and children of parents without a high school diploma are more likely to live in environments that pose barriers to health.

Clearly, the human, social and financial costs of health inequities are high.

A 2009 analysis estimates that between 2003 and 2006 in the U.S., the combined cost of inequalities and premature death was \$1.24 trillion. Elimination of health disparities for minorities would have lowered direct medical care expenditures by approximately \$230 billion. And indirect costs, like lost productivity, resulting from illness and premature death were estimated at more than \$1 trillion. (LaVeist, Gaskin, and Richard)

Going Beyond the Bounds of Medicine to Build Health Equity

Christiana Care is one of the nation's largest health care systems. With our size and scope, Christiana Care is intrinsically linked to the health and well-being of our region. We work internally to advance health equity, and we also partner in our community to help address the devastating effects of the social inequities that negatively impact health, even moving beyond the traditional bounds of medicine.

We collaborate with community organizations, nonprofits, government agencies, foundations and other health organizations to break down barriers to good health.

In addition to St. Patrick's, our partnerships and health equity initiatives include:

Carelink CareNow Community, our specially trained field-based team, works with individuals who have chronic disease coupled with behavioral health, substance use disorder and significant socio-economic issues. This program has reduced hospital utilization by a very significant 37 percent. The program also supports St. Pat's, serving 2,000 individuals in the past year with 9,200 interventions including links to medical care, transportation, health education and financial assistance, helping to cut down on Emergency Department visits or hospitalizations.

Christiana Care's Medical Legal Partnership with the Community Legal Aid Society of Delaware empowers patients with the help they need to address legal problems, such as with housing, utilities or coverage, that create barriers to good health.

With Urban Acres Produce, which provides community-owned farm stands in the city, Christiana Care and Westside Family Healthcare are piloting Produce Rx, a nutrition incentive program. Based on successful national models, the pilot offers participating prenatal and diabetic patients a "prescription" from a clinician that serves as a voucher to buy fresh produce from Urban Acres.

Our Community Health Worker training program prepares lay individuals from some of Delaware's most vulnerable areas to work in their home community to address barriers to optimal health. This model has been shown to improve health outcomes and reduce costs, and our program aligns with recommendations from the Delaware Center for Health Innovation and the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Innovation.

Our promotoras, a Spanish term for "health promoters," provide diabetes and mental health information and promote cancer screenings in Hispanic communities, where the rates of diabetes are almost double those of non-Hispanic whites.

For women and infants, our Healthy Beginnings program with the Delaware Division of Public Health seeks to reduce infant mortality rates by helping patients identify and address pregnancy risks before conception, with the support of our Community Health Workers.

On a city-wide scale, we're working with Reeds Refuge, a Wilmington youth development nonprofit, to provide critical dental care to children who might not otherwise receive it.

Christiana Care's 17 school-based health centers, in collaboration with school districts and DHSS, provide comprehensive medical and mental health care services in schools, eliminating many of the reasons teens don't

seek care—cost, confidentiality, lack of transportation and appointment times conflicting with school or work.

To address the barriers to care for patients with limited English proficiency, Christiana Care has a team of 25 medical interpreters in Spanish, American Sign Language, Mandarin, Bengali and Hindi and a program of dual role medical interpreters (staff also trained as medical interpreters) in 24 different languages.

The eBrightHealth alliance joins Christiana Care with Nemours/A.I. duPont, Bayhealth Medical Center, Beebe Healthcare, Nanticoke Health Services and other health providers to collaborate statewide on best practices, heightening care quality and patient experience and reducing the cost of care.

This is just a glimpse at some of the many steps Christiana Care is taking toward health equity and creating value in our state.

Value and Gain

Christiana Care Health System is powered by people who dedicate their lives to serving others. We are committed to advancing health equity because we are committed to serving our neighbors and ensuring that everyone in our community has the opportunity to achieve their best health.

In today's complex world, too many Delawareans face challenging obstacles to good health. As a state we must confront these barriers to good health head on – by working together to improve the social and environmental conditions impacting the lives and health of members of our community. The social and economic costs of ignoring health inequities are high – much higher than partnering to address barriers to good health.

Advancing health equity makes a genuine difference in the lives of individuals like Irlene -- and a positive impact socially and economically for the entire community we all serve together. ■



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For more information, contact Kelly Wetzel at
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