

At the Center of the Safety Net

“I was so jealous,” remembers Diane Gass of a visit to Philadelphia’s Abbotsford-Falls Family Practice in the early 1990s.

A nurse-managed health center, it stood right at the center of one of the city’s largest public housing developments. “I said to myself, we have to get one of these centers in our neighborhood!” Gass, who heads the tenant council of Norris Apartments, a public housing property located several miles away in North Philadelphia, worked with city council and faculty from nearby Temple University to bring a similar clinic – **PHMC Health Connection** – to her community.

Though Gass liked what she saw in East Falls, she did not know that she would be helping to bring a cutting-edge model of health care delivery to her neighbors: the nurse-led, patient-centered primary care home. According to Nancy Rothman, the Independence Foundation Professor of Urban Community Nursing at Temple University and a consultant with Public Health Management Corporation, nurse-led health homes offer a uniquely comprehensive, locally engaged and cost-effective solution. “Nurse-led homes work closely with communities,” says Rothman. “We are known to listen very well. We look at patients holistically, and focus not just on chief complaints, but on seeing the whole picture and setting goals for self-management. We are also very economical.”

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For Gass, who has lived in the Norris Apartments for more than 40 years, being part of the PHMC Health Connections Community Advisory Board is a labor of love. “The nurses are the best thing that ever happened to us,” says Gass. “They really picked us up. They did so much more than they were supposed to do.” In a neighborhood where residents often did not seek medical care or relied on the local emergency department, having advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) available has had a great impact. Gass remembers one of the first needs the community board brought to the clinic nurses: controlling a ringworm epidemic. “Right then and there, their response sold me,” says Gass.



Photo: Michael Tolbert

“No problem was too small for them. They took the time to listen to us and then made sure we got everything we needed.” Local residents also recognize the difference the clinic has made in confronting the community’s more formidable problems: identifying and controlling high blood pressure, diabetes and asthma. “We identified a lot of young black men with undiagnosed hypertension and were able to get them treated,” notes Rothman. “It’s all about building trust and getting to know people in their own community.” Other hallmarks of the site’s community engagement include flexible, same-day scheduling that enables patients to meet family and work obligations. The advanced practice registered nurses also support many other aspects of the safety net, from pitching in to help sustain an after-school program to making sure each patient has access to insurance coverage.

Nearly 500 primary care patients of all ages come to the center every month. Consistent immunization outreach has enabled more and more children to enroll in Head Start. Access to family planning has resulted in a decrease in teen pregnancies. In the end, it comes down to relationships. “The nurses take a whole lot of time with you,” says Gass. “They make sure they cover everything that’s on your body, and even outside your body. When we have a problem, we talk it over with the nurses.”

PHMC administers two other nurse-led federally qualified health centers in Philadelphia. Rising Sun Health Center in northeast Philadelphia collaborates with the Hill Creek housing project, providing 40% of the residents with primary care. Language lines and Spanish-speaking staff cater to the needs of a diverse population of recent immigrants. Mary Howard Health Center is the only health center in the city designed to serve the homeless population. There, care is delivered by highly skilled practitioners with deep insight into the culture of homelessness. The center's staff includes advanced practice nurse practitioners, two psychiatric nurse practitioners and a social worker.

The nurse-led primary care model is in use at three Public Health Management Corporation sites in Philadelphia:

PHMC Health Connection: 3 full-time nurse practitioners
 2,095 patients
 35% Uninsured
 50% Medicaid
 2% Medicare
 13% Private

Rising Sun Health Center: 2 full-time nurse practitioners
 1,775 patients
 35% Uninsured
 50% Medicaid
 3% Medicare
 1% CHIP
 11% Private

Mary Howard Health Center: 4.5 full-time nurse practitioners
 1,772 patients
 40% Uninsured
 54% Medicaid
 6% Medicare

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Philadelphia: Fertile Ground for Patient-Centered Primary Care

Why is Pennsylvania ahead of the curve in establishing nurse-led medical homes?

In part, it's because of long-standing interest at both the state and local levels in expanding the role of nurse practitioners in the primary care workforce.

In 2007, the Pennsylvania Chronic Care Management, Reimbursement and Cost Reduction Commission developed a strategic plan for treating chronic disease that would improve the quality of care for those with these conditions while reducing avoidable illnesses and their costs. Recognizing and expanding the role of nurses was at the heart of many of the health care reforms – and funding opportunities – laid out in the plan.

The Chronic Care Initiative is a patient-centered primary care home project of the larger Commission involving approximately 400 primary care providers through out the state, including 50 nurse practitioners. Outcomes from the Chronic Care Initiative have been extremely positive especially for patients with chronic conditions like diabetes. Data from 2009 shows that diabetics participating in the initiative were 33% more likely to have control of their blood sugars, 40% more likely to have control of cholesterol levels and 25% more likely to have normal blood pressures when compared to non-participating diabetics.

In Philadelphia, the National Nursing Centers Consortium and local nurse faculty have focused attention on the issue. The Independence Foundation and the Philadelphia Housing Authority built nurse-managed centers in four Philadelphia public housing complexes. They are among the first such centers in the country.

At the end of 2010, eight nurse-led sites in Pennsylvania were so well established, they were among the first in the nation to receive recognition from the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) as Patient-Centered Medical Homes.

