Partnering to Transform Urban Health

Home to great artists like blues musician Muddy Waters, gospel singer Albertina Walker and authors Richard Wright and Lorraine Hansberry, Chicago’s South Side is one of America’s great cultural treasures. But its 1 million residents suffer disproportionately from diabetes, hypertension and asthma, while its infrastructure suffers from a dearth of grocery stores, pharmacies and primary care physicians and clinics.

The Urban Health Initiative (UHI) is the University of Chicago Medical Center’s commitment — in partnership with civic leaders, community organizations, health care providers and residents — to correct these disparities through clinical care, community-based research and education. UHI’s comprehensive and holistic approach to improving long-term health on the South Side of Chicago also may provide a model for improving urban health nationwide.

A major factor in long-term health is having reliable, appropriate solutions for everyday health needs. Through the South Side Healthcare Collaborative (SSHC), a network of 25 health centers and six local hospitals, UHI helps South Side residents connect with community health centers and doctors who can provide preventive care, regular treatment for nonemergency health problems, long-term management of chronic disease and referrals to specialists.

UHI and its community partners also use research, surveys and other neighborhood-based approaches to discover new ways to keep people healthy. The Center for Community Health and Vitality is developing a community facility to help track and integrate local research to improve health.

Another research program is the South Side Health and Vitality Studies, a family of connected studies designed to gain a deep understanding of the health of the community by collecting data on local resources, the environment, individual health and technology. One of the studies is the Resource Mapping Project, a comprehensive census of all commercial, health care, social, cultural and civic resources on the South Side. The studies are led by teams of university and community members who are making the data available to the community to inform investments, programs and policy. The first phase of resource mapping data is available at SouthSideHealth.org.

Through education, UHI encourages physicians to practice in underserved communities. The REACH (Repayment for Education to Alumni in Community Health) program gives financial help to graduates of the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine or affiliated residency programs who choose to practice medicine at a community health center or hospital on the South Side. The first REACH participant began practicing family medicine in fall 2009 at Chicago Family Health Center. Two others will join the program this fall.

Meanwhile, the Office of Community-Based Medical Education exposes physicians in training to the rewards and challenges of practicing in underserved areas and encourages young physicians to focus on primary care and community health. Programs include student-run free clinics, quarterly days of service, health education and the Summer Service Partnership, which pairs medical and public high school students to work on sustainable community health service projects.

Harlan M. Krumholz, MD, a nationally recognized authority on public health at the Yale School of Medicine, told the Chronicle of Higher Education that UHI is “one of the most ambitious and innovative efforts being undertaken by urban teaching hospitals.” Reform of our nation’s health system will not be complete without improving preventive care, promoting more cost-effective medical services and helping people in underserved communities get better routine care. Through UHI, the University of Chicago Medical Center and its partners are addressing these issues head on.