

HealthReach brings care to rural areas

By GREGORY BROWN
Correspondent

Thirty years ago, a 78-year-old woman in Rangeley might have been forced to travel hours to receive quality health care, often times at the hands of a stranger.

That is no longer the case. A woman needing the same care today just has to pick up the phone and make a call, or travel a few miles to find the comfort and care of a doctor whom she has been seeing for years and considers her own — a doctor, who serves a tight-knit rural community, but is, in reality, part of a much bigger picture, one of more than 200 people employed by HealthReach Community Health Centers.

HealthReach Community Health Centers form a network of 11 federally qualified health centers that provide comprehensive primary-care services to more than 38,000 Maine residents every year.

The care centers differ from the stereotypical health clinic — a local clinic that serves a depressed neighborhood and may cater only to impover-

ished families. "In general, we take care of and provide general services to all age groups and all people, regardless of socioeconomic factors," said President and CEO Stephen Walsh. "Some clinics also have family planning services and some perform minor surgery."

HealthReach Health Centers, which are coordinated from a central Waterville office, also arrange home visits — a feature that is somewhat uncommon in many of today's federally qualified health center or clinic models.

"Our services are available to everyone," Walsh said. "We bill all of the major insurance companies, Medicare and MaineCare, and we also establish payment plans when needed."

Through funding from the U.S. Bureau of Primary Health Care, the centers are able to offer a sliding fee

**Stephen Walsh,
HealthReach, President and CEO**

program, which determines aid based on family size and income. According to Walsh, more than 11,000 patients receive MaineCare, and a total of 4,339 patients are enrolled in the sliding fee program.

The network has at times struggled to be as visible as its caretakers would like. "One of the biggest challenges we face is the size of our area," Walsh said. "People often associate with their local centers, not the organization in general. We want to increase awareness."

The organization has, however, grown significantly over the past 20 years despite those challenges — growing from one center that opened in 1975 in Bingham to 11 centers — and officials have high expectations for further growth well into the future.

"The initial government model was for one physician per center, but we

convinced them to go to two physicians, and it has now grown to four physicians," said Dr. Forrest West, director of the Albion-based Lovejoy Health Center. "The growth in stability has been important too — before the centers were established, doctors would often come and go, but in our health center people have generally stayed a long time, including two physicians who have each stayed 27 years." The Lovejoy center has undergone three renovations since opening in 1978 and recently moved in to a new 600-square-foot facility.

Beyond direct caretaking of patients — HealthReach Community Health Center's backbone — the organization is deeply involved in federal and state collaborative efforts directed at tweaking theories and designing models for more effectively treating chronic disease.

The Lovejoy Health Center was recently selected to participate in the U.S. Department of Health and Human

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Services upcoming Health Disparities Collaborative on Diabetes Care — a national, multi-year initiative that seeks to determine a more efficient model of care to manage chronic diseases

"Our goal is to close the gap between what's the known treatment and what is the best actual treatment, by using the chronic-care model to actively take care of people with chronic diseases," Dr. West said. "We want to get the patient more involved in their care so the patient knows as much as possible and can self-manage their treatment."

At the state level, Dr. Barbara Moss is leading Sheepscot Valley Health Center's participation in the MaineHealth Chronic Disease Diabetes Collaborative.

While HealthReach's centers are mostly in central and western Maine — facilities range from Rangeley to Albion and the Richmond area to Bingham — with other health care centers and clinics covering the north-



Contributed photo

Members of HealthReach Community Health Centers' Lovejoy Health Center Health Disparities Collaborative team, left to right, front row: Melissa Murray, Front Office Coordinator; Paula Dube, RN; Lois Bouchard, Practice Manager; back row, from left: Forrest West, M.D.; Christa Dillihunt, Director of Performance Improvement and Clinical Support Services; and Stephen E. Walsh, President and CEO, HealthReach Community Health Centers.

ern areas of the state, the fact remains that patients are plentiful, as someone is always in need of quality care in rural areas.

Health reach means easy access and a quality of life boost from having

close health care," Jill Conover, public relations director for the organization, said. "We touch lives of so many people in so many ways."

"This agency is able to develop and deliver preventive care constantly,"

said Leonard Dow, an area businessman and member of the Lovejoy center's governing board. "We're developing parallel pathways, always adding family planning services and we don't turn down anybody."