



Bonnie Litch

Cover the Uninsured Week 2005

Healthcare organizations get involved in the community.

Since 2003 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has sponsored a program to raise awareness on the critical issue of bringing healthcare coverage to 45 million Americans who are currently uninsured. More than 250 national organizations and 2,500 local groups have planned more than 5,000 events that focused much needed attention on Cover the Uninsured Week 2005.

Here are some excellent examples of how some healthcare organizations participated in 2005.

Adopt an Angel

In support of the St. Joseph Health System's commitment and priority to care for the poor, **Mission Hospital** in Mission Viejo, California, sponsored its second annual *Uninsured Angels Project*. Held during Cover the Uninsured Week 2005, Mission Hospital employees and physicians were invited to "adopt" an uninsured child by sponsoring a portion of their annual healthcare coverage premium in Orange County's California Kids insurance plan, a state-funded initiative to provide one year of basic health and dental coverage for eligible children.

The hospital collaborated with children from Think Together OC (an after-school program), who handcraft-

ed unique clothespin dolls, each representing an uninsured "angel" (child) in south Orange County. Throughout the week, employees and physicians adopted the angels at a donation of \$120 in exchange for one of the decorated dolls. On behalf of Mission Hospital, Peter Bastone, president and chief executive officer, agreed to match funds donated by staff. Nearly \$30,000 was raised to provide health insurance to 226 uninsured children. The money raised will offset premium costs paid by the CaliforniaKids Foundation and the children's parents.

In addition, Mission Hospital promoted outreach efforts to identify employees and community members with children who need low-cost health insurance coverage. Enrollment events were held at schools, churches, and family resource centers to enroll eligible families in state-funded programs. Through these efforts, 100 children were identified and enrolled in health insurance plans.

Knowledge Is a Critical Weapon

Seeking to give focus to the voice of concern for America's uninsured, **Avera Health**, based in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, used a survey tool developed by St. Joseph Health System's Center for Healthcare Reform. The survey asked participants to select

five priorities from a list of 15 values for shaping the U.S. healthcare system. After posting the survey on Avera's Web site, www.avera.org, the healthcare system sent e-mail messages to employees throughout its region each day of the week. The messages sought to educate employees by presenting a common myth about the uninsured, countered by the applicable fact in the region. Employees were prompted with a link to log onto the Web site to take the survey. A newspaper ad in the middle of the week encouraged public participation in the survey.

E-messages also announced a Friday videoconference with Deb Fischer-Clemens, director of Avera's Center for Public Policy. Four of Avera's regional centers, which cover a service area that encompasses eastern South Dakota, southwestern Minnesota, northwestern Iowa, northeastern Nebraska, and the southeastern border of North Dakota, were linked to the conference hosted at Avera's central office in Sioux Falls. Fischer-Clemens' goal was to raise



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awareness and explain key challenges to resolving the issue.

More than 330 individuals took part in the survey, 89 percent of whom were Avera employees. The following four key values rose to the top, in this order, with the first significantly outweighing all others as a priority:

- **Universal access:** The U.S. health-care system should make needed services available to all, regardless of ability to pay.
- **Prevention:** The U.S. healthcare system should give priority to services and programs that promote health and keep people from getting sick, such as smoking prevention and nutrition/diet education, childhood immunizations, and cancer screenings.
- **Healthcare as a national concern:** The U.S. healthcare system, like homeland security and interstate freeways, needs national planning and financing.
- **Stable costs:** The U.S. healthcare system should keep healthcare costs from rising faster than the cost of other goods and services.

Avera plans to share these results in its advocacy efforts and expand availability of the survey to the public in an effort to continue to promote a focused grassroots voice regarding the issue.

First-Hand Experience

In order to help people personally feel the struggles facing individuals in poverty, **St. Vincent Randolph Hospital** in Winchester, Indiana, created a “poverty simulation experience”

for concerned citizens in the community. This experience is designed to help participants understand what it might be like to be a part of a typical low-income family trying to survive from month to month. The object is to sensitize participants to the realities of life faced by low-income people.

The simulation requires the involvement of between 30 and 75 people who assume the roles of up to 26 different families living in poverty. The task of the “families” is to provide for basic necessities and shelter for one “month,” consisting of four 15-minute “weeks.” Also involved in the simulation are individuals who represent community resources and services, an employment office, a pawn broker, a grocery store, a welfare office, a currency exchange, a police officer, a utility collector, and a landlord/rent collector. The simulation lasted several hours and included a debriefing period during which participants and volunteer staff shared their feelings and experiences.

After completing the simulation, participants felt they had a greater understanding of the challenges facing those in poverty. One individual said the program was “excellent for raising awareness in our community. Many of our community leaders are completely ignorant to the hardships that many of our residents in Randolph County experience on a daily basis.” Another participant stated that she was now motivated to make a difference in her community.

Events such as these have helped to raise much needed awareness for this serious problem. Did your organization participate this year? If not, now is the time to prepare for next year’s campaign. Join

the ranks of healthcare organizations, community groups, religious organizations, and businesses to help educate policymakers, lay leaders, and the public on the plight of the uninsured. ▲

Bonnie Litch is a freelance writer in Northbrook, Illinois.

ACHE is a national partner in the *Covering Kids & Families* Back-to-School Campaign. Each August and September, the program encourages parents to enroll their children who are uninsured, and potentially eligible, in Medicaid or the State Children’s Health Insurance Program. For more information, go to www.coveringkidsandfamilies.org.



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