



National  
Association  
of Public  
Hospitals  
and Health  
Systems

# SAFETY NET HEALTH SYSTEMS

## An Essential Partner in Reducing Health Care Disparities

While increasing health care access is key, reducing health care disparities is vital in ensuring a health care system that works for everyone. Safety net health systems—America's public and teaching hospitals and their outpatient clinics—are leading the way in eliminating health care disparities to ensure high-quality care to all patients, regardless of income, race, culture or ethnicity.



We ensure high quality care for all.

From chronic disease to trauma and burns—illness and injury do not discriminate. While we all are susceptible to illness, not all Americans have equal access to health care. One of the greatest challenges facing the American health care system is eliminating health care disparities.

Language and cultural barriers, socioeconomic limitations and lack of insurance all disproportionately affect the ability of racial and ethnic minority patients to navigate the health system and access the care they need to lead healthy and productive lives.

That's why safety net health systems are constantly working to ensure the highest quality of care to all patients. They understand firsthand the difficulties certain patients face in accessing the increasingly complex U.S. health care system. Community outreach, patient navigation services, translation services, and employing a racially and ethnically diverse workforce are all tools safety net systems have developed

to make sure all patients gain access to care that fits their personal needs.

Here's how safety net health systems are making a difference and reducing disparities:

We improve cancer survival rates.

White women in Chicago have a higher incidence rate of breast cancer, but black women are 75 percent more likely to die from the disease. Two safety net health systems joined together to give all women in Chicago a better chance at survival. Sinai Health System collaborated with Access Community Health Network, the largest federally qualified health center in the country, to partner in the STAND Against Cancer Initiative. STAND aims to improve breast cancer survival among poor, uninsured black and Hispanic women via community outreach through Illinois churches, faith-based organizations, the American Cancer Society and the Springfield Urban League. Sinai Health System provided mammography services and follow-up care to over 3,800 patients in 2007—almost half of the hospital's breast cancer diagnoses are made through the STAND program. Sinai also employs special "patient navigators" to improve care coordination, conduct patient follow-up, and ensure that patients feel comfortable throughout testing, diagnosis and treatment. In 2006, patient navigators reduced by 60 percent the number of days between diagnosis and the initiation of treatment for STAND patients.



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In that same year, the rate of patients with likely breast cancer who failed to come back for a follow-up appointment decreased by over 50 percent.

### We work with a diverse staff to care for diverse communities.

Coler-Goldwater Memorial Hospital, part of the New York City Health and Hospital Corporation, serves one of the most diverse populations in the world. The facility's longstanding commitment to cultural diversity is evident in its diverse staff—over 88% of employees are racial or ethnic minorities. Coler-Goldwater's diverse staff provides care to an equally diverse group of patients—roughly 77% of patients are racial and ethnic minorities. Many of the patients speak little to no English, are low-income, lack health insurance; a large percentage are immigrants who have been in the U.S. less than four years.

The Coler-Goldwater Diversity Initiative was established to address the major challenges in optimizing the quality of patient care despite significant language and cultural obstacles. It provides medical interpreter certification training and Spanish classes for employees who provide direct medical care to patients, mandatory diversity and cultural competency training for staff, as well as access to a live language telephone-based translation system for 150 languages.

The initiative is delivering results. The Spanish class for health care workers and the medical interpreter class

have currently yielded a total of 46 Trained Medical Interpreters for the Coler-Goldwater facilities. Results from the facility's Patient Satisfaction Survey show that the number of patients receiving appropriate translation services has increased.

### We use diverse tools to enhance culturally sensitive care.

UC Davis Health System in Sacramento, CA, has a 30-year tradition of providing medical care to ethnically diverse, medically underserved populations in its community. Its free, student-run neighborhood clinics reach out to populations that typically have difficulty accessing health-care services. Through its Center for Reducing Health Disparities, UC Davis Health System partners with diverse community groups and patients to reduce disparities, prevent chronic illness and increase participation in clinical research. A few of UC Davis Health System's most recent initiatives include:

- A Transcultural Linguistic Care nursing program to aid Spanish, Russian and Hmong patients upon admission and throughout their care;
- Cultural-competency pocket guides for medical students, residents, fellows and faculty;
- Participation in more than 20 annual health fairs in diverse and underserved communities; and,
- Multilingual patient-navigator kiosks in six locations throughout the hospital for both patients and visitors.

### We deliver better health care for all.

Safety net health systems are not only working to resolve health disparities—they are reaching this goal. In a recently published study, researchers found that at Colorado's large urban safety net health system—Denver Health—disparities in care did not exist among racial or ethnic groups for the likelihood of receiving various cancer screenings and having properly managed chronic conditions. In most instances, the quality of care at Denver Health for ethnic and racial minorities met or exceeded national benchmarks.<sup>1</sup>

### We are here to help.

Safety net health systems work to fill the gaps in our nation's complicated health care system and provide long-term solutions that improve patient outcomes and lower health care costs. We believe this experience will aid those working toward real health care reform.

Count on the National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems to provide a real world perspective on how to create a health care system that is effective, efficient and responsive to patients. Call on us—we are always here to help. ■

#### NOTES

1. Eiser, S. et al., 2008. "Can America's Urban Safety Net Systems be a Solution to Unequal Treatment?" *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*.