

Program Excellence Award for Outstanding Partnerships: Public- Private Partnerships

POPULATIONS GREATER THAN 50,000



WANDA S. GREENE

ICMA's Program Excellence Award for Public-Private Partnerships recognizes a local government and its private-sector partner (including nongovernmental organizations) that have demonstrated the value of public-private partnerships as an effective technique for introducing greater efficiency, innovation, and civic awareness into a variety of local government services. This year, the Program Excellence Award for Public-Private Partnerships in the greater-than-50,000 population category is awarded to Buncombe County, North Carolina, and County Manager Wanda S. Greene for the county's commitment to making health care accessible to all residents.

In the mid-1990s, Buncombe County, North Carolina, like counties all across America, had an overwhelming number of uninsured and underinsured residents who

had limited access to medical care. Uninsured residents often delayed seeking needed health care due to financial concerns. This resulted in an inefficient, costly health care system in which patients with recurring health care problems received "band-aid" care, without resolving their health needs. Buncombe County Health Center was struggling under the weight of an overwhelming primary care caseload with nowhere to send patients who needed specialty care. Project Access was established to address these problems. The primary goal of Project Access is to provide appropriate access to the full continuum of health care services for uninsured people who cannot afford medical care.

Project Access is a cooperative effort of the Health Center, the county, and the Buncombe County Medical Society (BCMS), a nonprofit professional association of physicians. Area hospitals, indigent care clinics, and pharmacies are additional partners directly involved in providing health care for those who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Buncombe County provided seed money and has continued to allocate funds to cover administrative costs. About 85 percent of all doctors in the county agreed to support the initiative by seeing 10 to 20 patients a year free of charge. This has allowed the Buncombe County Health Center to greatly expand its role in providing primary care to the indigent population.

The Buncombe County Medical Society provides program oversight, physician recruitment and retention, coordination and tracking of patient referrals and services, and management of medication assistance. BCMS effectively fosters the enthusiastic support of numerous government, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations. As a result of the spirit of cooperation, BCMS Project Access provides compre-

hensive free physician care, medications, in-patient and outpatient hospital services, patient referral, and coordination of these medical services to 13,000 of the county's estimated 15,000 uninsured low-income citizens. The program even includes a patient reminder service that helps patients keep their appointments and assure that they understand and comply with their treatment plans.

Even as a growing number of people lack health care coverage (18.5 percent in 2000, up from 10.8 percent in 1995), there are fewer reports of problems accessing health care services. A 2000 study revealed that 93 percent of residents indicate they have a regular physician, clinic, or health center, up from 78.7 percent in 1995. Since Project Access was started in 1996, every patient who has attempted to access primary and/or specialty care has received it. This has reduced the number of times patients are seen for unresolved medical problems in local nonprofit clinics or the County Health Department primary care clinics, allowing more patients to receive primary care services at a lower cost to the county. Project Access has leveraged and documented over \$3.5 million in free care, including physician volunteer time, hospital services, and pharmacy medication discounts.

Nonprofit indigent care clinics are common; what makes Project Access unique is that it is integrated with or supported by the local government. The creative approach in Buncombe allows Project Access to sustain the multiple public/private partnerships necessary to efficiently provide systematic access to health care for the entire indigent population. It demonstrates the belief of county commissioners, doctors and other health care professionals, that every person—regardless of his or her ability to pay—deserves quality health care. ♣