

Creative thinking helps get services to those who need them most

A public health story from...

St. Louis City Health Department

Making their communities by storm, youth juvenile offenders and their supervisor are raising awareness and educating teenagers in St. Louis about STDs, the benefits of abstinence, risks associated with risky sexual behavior, emergency preparedness, handwashing, lead poisoning and other health issues.

Thinking outside the box, the City of St. Louis

Department of Health is currently finding new ways to educate communities on STDs and other diseases.

The closing of City Hospitals in 1985, lead the city health department to be the only entity to provide categorical clinical services of STD and TB. In 2001 a team of experts were brought in to assess the operations within the department. It was realized that simply stating the floor needed for services was violating the confidentiality of clients who entered the building. The team also determined that the city health department was not located in the most accessible place to provide customers with holistic or comprehensive health care that would address all health issues, not just STDs.

“We had to change the way we did things, so we started thinking more creatively,” said Melba Moore, Commissioner of Health for the City of St. Louis Department of Health. According to Melba they had to start looking at it as a business and try to determine where they could reach the most people and have the biggest impact. The solution...bringing these services into the community.

“In order to change risk-taking behaviors, we have to change people’s minds and what better way than to start in the community where the people are located,” said Melba.

To better reach the youth, the greatest at risk population, the city health department began a program called Youth Empowerment and Advocacy of Health (Y.E.A.H) to work with youth who could relate to their peers by going into schools, juvenile court systems, and community establishments to educate them about STDs.

“After reassessing the net worth of our partnership and looking at the data, it was revealed we needed to establish a program to meet the needs of our most at risk population, our youth,” stated Melba.

A supervisor for the program was needed when one of their partners mentioned he had the perfect candidate—a former youth juvenile offender and an ex-gang member. It raised a few eyebrows, but it was a perfect fit.

“It has really been awesome to see the youth grow into role models among their peers and within their communities,” said Melba. Their next event, The Body and Soul Project is scheduled for December 8 at Forest Park Community College. An estimate of over 500 youth and parents are anticipated to attend.

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Taking Care of Folks at Every Stage of Life

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lderly Mr. Smith has heart disease and high blood pressure. His neighbor, Mrs. Jones, has a bad toothache. And Mrs. Jones' daughter is pregnant, but experiencing unusual dizziness. None has health insurance. These three are a

composite of the 8,400 people who walk into St. Louis County's three public health clinics each month. They come for a variety of medical reasons, ranging from prenatal and dental care to combating sexually transmitted and chronic diseases. Each is confident about one thing: care is provided even if one cannot pay, even if one does not have insurance.

"We provide comprehensive medical services to the uninsured and underinsured residents of St. Louis County," says Al Swanegan, the clinics' administrator. "Without us, I'm sure area emergency rooms would have to handle many more patients."

What's more, the quality of care a person receives at the clinics is first-rate and individualized, similar to that found in a private family doctor's office, says Swanegan. Why? Each of the clinics has two family practice physicians, a pediatrician, and women's health specialists on staff, while most of Missouri's local public health agencies--114 in all--have no such doctors on staff. "This means we can provide services for people of all ages," Swanegan adds. "We can provide the comprehensive care they need right here, and when we cannot, our collaborations with other local health entities allow us to refer them to providers who can."

The clinics have also carved out a funding collaboration with St. Louis and Washington Universities, and Barnes-Jewish Hospital, consistently ranked among the top ten in the nation's hospitals. "Our various collaborations allow us to provide the comprehensive healthcare that families require," says Swanegan. "We also combat the problem of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) head-on with confidential testing and counseling services. Our health centers are a dynamic and important element of the healthcare infrastructure in the St. Louis area. Our goal is always a healthy community of healthy individuals at every stage of life."

*"...We provide first-rate,
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