Financing Good Health

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation wants to help residents stay out of the doctor’s office. In 2007, it handed out $8.2 million in grants locally by Mike Costanza

A Rochester foundation reaches deep to help those in the region stay healthy.

“Our focus really is on helping people stay out of the health care system in the first place,” said John Urban, President of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. “We have the resources that will enable us to fund activities which we believe over the long term will positively impact health care in our region.”

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation (GRHF) was born in early 2006 as a result of the merger of two not-for-profit health insurers, Rochester-based Preferred Care and the Health Care of Schenectady. Proceeds from the merger came to $20 million, which by law had to remain in the not-for-profit realm. Urban said that Preferred Care's community-minded executive director, who used the cash to fund and fund GRHF as a means of helping those living in the region remain or become healthy.

“This is really carrying forward the mission of the creation of Preferred Care,” said Urban, who was CEO of Preferred Care at the time. “They [the board members] saw this simply as the next phase of a way to be impactful.

In 2007, GRHF handed out $8.2 million in grants locally, including $5.1 million in relatively small, one-shot opportunity grants to local organizations. Though most of them were helpful to those in need of health services, others had nothing to do with medicine.

“We don’t think that the health care system, as people come to understand it, is the only way of doing it. It is focused on how you keep people healthy in the first place,” Urban said.

Urban also mentioned that the $20 million went to the Rochester School District, for example, was given just over $150,000 for equipment for its fitness center in 2007, and the Urban League of Rochester $215,000 for a health and family wellness program.

Much larger grants are going to long-term, tightly-focused programs that fall into three categories: preventing poor health, raising the general level of health among the residents of entire neighborhoods, or improving the health care system.

In what may be the most ambitious of its preventive efforts, GRHF is spearheading an intensive 10-year attack on childhood obesity in Monroe County.

“We have emphasized, and I’m in the process of implementing, a community-wide strategy to combat childhood obesity,” Urban said.

The problem has serious implications for the community as a whole. A study by a GRHF task force found that 15 percent of Monroe County’s children between the ages of 2 and 19 years are overweight or obese, as measured by body mass index. Unchanged, this condition can lead to a host of medical problems, including diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, asthma and arthritis.

GRHF’s task force, which included representatives of the University of Rochester Medical Center, the police department of pediatrics and the YMCA of Greater Rochester, subsequently approved a strategic plan to tackle the problem. Through funding programs that help kids become more physically active and improve their nutrition and through other measures, the foundation hopes to reduce the percentage of overweight or obese kids in the county to 5 percent by 2017.

Urban said the foundation plans to give up to $2 million a year to the effort, at least in the beginning. As the effort focuses on older children, that amount should rise as the obesity epidemic ramps-up.

Andrew Doniger, director of the Monroe County Department of Public Health, said GRHF’s financial support would be welcome to the community.

“We don’t have resources, though that are dedicated to the interventions to prevent obesity,” Urban said. Doniger heads the GRHF task force. “It’s not been part of the traditional funding streams for public health.”

GRHF has also committed to eliminating lead poisoning amongst Rochester’s children by 2010, according to Urban. The foundation has earmarked for the task over three years includes more than $1.5 million to be given to the City of Rochester. The money is to be used to help residents be more knowledgeable about ways to prevent and pay for repairs needed to reduce exposure to lead through deteriorating paint.

The foundation recently provided a $75,000 grant to the Rochester community health center in the 14621 zip code, one area in that has shown a high rate of childhood lead poisoning.

The foundation is reaching into city neighborhoods in other ways, as well. In June, GRHF awarded the provision of $325,000 in grants for neighborhood health improvement.

Urban said that four non-profit community organizations that serve some of Rochester’s poorest communities and one in Dundee, NY, have been given grants of $65,000 to fund the first steps in an effort to improve the general health of the residents of their respective areas.

The first part of this effort will be engaging with the residents of the identified neighborhood, and having them say “Here are the things that are most important to them,” Urban said.

As such, the three-stage project reaches out for feedback on the kinds of traditional health care, starting with the surveys the non-profits are slated to conduct in their areas.

“Health is defined in a much broader context,” Urban said. “So, GRHF, with the help of its partners, is looking at what services, particularly the non-profits, can do to improve the health care.”

Rochester Health began the project in June by bringing together several neighborhood nonprofits that serve its area. “This is strictly a grass roots effort,” Urban said.

The organizations picked a 13-block section of Jordan’s service area, and began recruiting residents adults and youths—to survey those living on the block about their health and the kinds of services they need. Dalton said that the survey would cover a variety of issues that can affect residents’ health, including the safety of the area, their access to transportation, the availability of health care, and the presence or absence of social support and friends.

Dalton said that the survey process itself would draw in the community, and that the survey results could be used to encourage more residents to participate. She added that the survey results could be used to encourage more residents to participate.

“We actually chose to invest in the community,” Dalton said. “Our survey results are slated to be in by the end of the summer, and the final report is due in October.

Dalton said that phase two of the project, the participants would develop an asset-based plan for improving the health status of the area. In phase three, the participants would devise ways of making the positive changes they helped identify more affordable.

She said that each phase of the project would take about a year, with GRHF funding slated to grow to about $30 million in the third phase.

In addition to its projects, GRHF is helping to bring about improvements to the Rochester region’s health care system. In February, according to Urban, $366,000 in one grant totaling $377,000 helped get the Greater Rochester Health Information Organization (Rochester RHIO) up and running.

“With e-prescribing, we’re able to increase their access to records by electronic means,” Urban said.

Using software and telephones, Rochester RHIO has linked five local practices and local medical labs, allowing the practices to receive medical test results practically at the click of a computer mouse.

Participating physicians are also able to see in their practices through the health information exchange system could eventually allow practices to receive medical test results electronically. The non-profit medical information exchange system could eventually allow physicians, medical labs, insurance companies, and even emergency medical services in the nine-county region to easily send and receive medical information.

That helps both on the quality of treatment, but also on the efficiency of the whole health system, said Jeff Kremmer, executive director of Rochester RHIO.

Though GRHF provides the funding integral to all of the projects it supports, it emphasizes a collaborative relationship with those it funds is symbiotic.

“We can only be as effective as the programs that we fund. The organizations develop on our own, but we also need the organizations we fund to actually execute the kinds of things we’re looking to fund.”