

Goal is Decent Healthcare for All

County faces hurdle with grassroots solutions

BY RAYMOND RENDELMAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Among all the major community-justice challenges, none presents more complications than providing an entire population with decent healthcare.

Despite serious budget limitations to address preexisting disparities in a wide range of ailments, the Multnomah County Health Department tackles the issues using grassroots methods.

The citizen-led Community Health Council represents patients' concerns to department leadership in a key way that the agency avoids top-down management. A direct link between officials and community members, many of whom are department patients, is especially important considering the struggles that the county faces in providing healthcare to all.

Visit one of the county's health clinics, and the first thing you'll probably notice is its crowd of diverse patients in the waiting room. Officials calculate that more clinics, especially in East County, would generate similar scenes of people.

"We could open another clinic a number of places and be filled up, so there's many more people out

there who need the services in the community than our capacity allows," says Lillian Shirley, department director.

Such an overburdened system might be easier to run through a strict hierarchy, but Shirley welcomes the advice of normal folk by engaging with the council during its meetings, a practice above and beyond what the federal rules demand. "Technically you don't need to have the director there," says Kate Yen, council coordinator, "but we make a sincere effort to make it high-profile and let the community make a difference."

The effort to bridge the gap between populations and leadership makes all the difference for a council member like Ruth Duran, who has strong ties with the Hispanic community and advocates for cultural sensitivity and translated materials at every opportunity.

"People have to know that, regardless of your culture, you should be treated the same," Duran says. "This is the United States, so it's time we started living up to our name."

Considering that half of the county's clients are children ages 18 and under, another council



PHOTO BY RAYMOND RENDELMAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Community Health Council members Ruth Duran (left) and Bonnie Malone meet outside the Multnomah County Health Center in northeast Portland.

member named Bonnie Malone advocates for school-based clinics whenever possible, saying that the council is tough on county leadership.

Malone had just finished meeting with a patient in an effort to mediate a healthcare-quality complaint when she met with Yen and

Duran. The three of them discussed the importance of talking about problems before they become formal, widespread concerns.

"With any system there's going to be something, but we're striving to fix that through electronic records, more oversight and a more holistic approach," Yen said.

Through their meeting with county and state representatives, and their commitment to healthcare access as an issue of justice, Yen, Duran and Malone proceeded to relate their struggle with worldwide civil-rights struggles, a sentiment easily found at the local health level. Reflecting countywide trends,

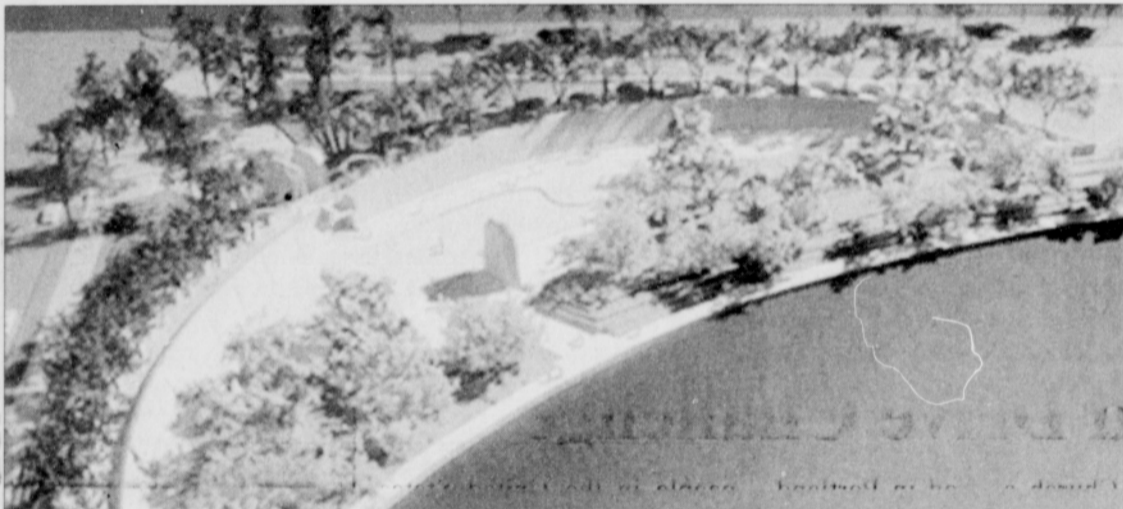
more uninsured patients are being seen at the county clinics, including the facility on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. According to last year's annual report, more than 28,000 of the 62,300 people who received healthcare services from the county last year didn't have insurance, marking about a four-percent increase in the total number of patients and the proportion of uninsured from the year before.

"There's no place to send the bill, so the county itself from its general fund has had to pick that up," Shirley says, acknowledging the community-wide challenge of assuring access to quality care for as many people as possible within increasingly limited budget.

Although the past decade significantly altered demographics of the northeast clinic's surrounding neighborhood, its patient demographics have remained steady. It still serves Hispanics at the highest rate followed by blacks then whites, the same breakdown it saw when the area was majority-black.

Northeast Clinic Director Bob Saum sees as reflective of ongoing civil-rights struggles along the symbolic boulevard.

"His vision of people being judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin is significant, and I think that addressing health disparities is in line with that vision," Saum says.



King Memorial Construction Nears

(AP)—Construction is slated to begin this spring on the long-planned Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

An artist's sketch shows the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial coming to the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C.

Organizers have collected about \$87 million of the \$100 million budget and are anticipating some major financial announcements next month, said Harry Johnson, president and chief executive of the foundation overseeing the project, which will feature a massive granite carving bearing King's likeness.

As long as work starts by April or May as planned, he said, the project would still be on schedule

for a 2009 opening. The foundation is now waiting for final permits from the National Park Service.

The memorial will sit on four acres along the edge of the Tidal Basin, between the Jefferson Memorial and Lincoln Memorial, where the civil-rights pioneer delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963. It will feature stone carvings, a raised walkway and stone walls engraved with King's quotes.

23rd Annual Tribute to 'Keep Alive the Dream'

On the Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday, World Arts Foundation, Inc. will present its 23rd-annual tribute to the great American civil-rights leader.

"Keep Alive the Dream" continues to be recognized as one of the finest community-based Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations in the U.S., as it gives voice to common citizens by showcasing the greater Portland community's response to historic achievements "against all odds" for civil rights and human dignity.

The stage program begins at 11 a.m. on Monday, Jan. 21 at Highland Christian Center, 7600 N.E. Glisan St.

Regional, national and local talent will converge in a diverse program of music, dance, theater, awards and presentations against a backdrop of gospel choirs in humble tribute to the American civil-rights movement for human dignity.

A donation of \$4 or four items of nonperishable food for the Oregon Food Bank will be accepted at the event.



Renee Mitchell

SEI Hosts 'Tangoing' Drama

"Tangoing with Tornadoes," a story speaking to domestic violence and the power of our words, is coming to the Center for Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI), 3920 N. Kerby Ave., for a series of public performances.

Producer Renee Mitchell calls the play a "choreopoem" because it includes music, poetry, singing and interpretive dance. She

hopes the script serves as a witness to everyone's story, no matter the gender, race, religion, language or socio-economic status.

Past audiences have been inspired to laugh out loud, even while being informed about the heavy subject matter.

Thanks to sponsorships by Pacific Power, Multnomah County

and United Way, no admission will be charged for the eight SEI performances scheduled at 7 p.m. this Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Jan. 18-20; and next Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Jan. 25-27. Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. are also scheduled Jan. 20 and Jan. 27.

To guarantee seats, RSVP with Christy at 503-249-1721 ex. 259.

Sylvester Recovers from Second Hip Surgery

Portland blues musician Norman Sylvester had successful hip replacement surgery Jan. 8 at Portland Adventist Medical center.

Sylvester has had such surgeries before; both his hips had been replaced in 2000, and one of his artificial hips failed after an automobile accident in 2006. Recovery time is expected to be at least two months.

Sylvester, 62, is one of the region's



Norman Sylvester

most popular entertainers, with a career that spans more than four decades. He has released three full-length albums under his own name, and performed at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, the Portland Waterfront Blues Festival, Seattle's Bumbershoot, the Mount Hood Jazz Festival, local live television and radio, as well as thousands of nightclub performances.

TriMet Responds to MLK Day Demand

TriMet bus and light-rail schedules for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Monday, Jan. 21 will be modified to match rider demand.

Because ridership on the holi-

day is expected to decrease by 25 percent over a normal weekday, the transportation agency is providing more service than a typical holiday/Sunday schedule.

Max trains will run on Saturday schedule and 59 of the most heavily-traveled bus lines will run on weekday schedules. Eighteen bus routes will run on Saturday schedule, and

11 weekday express lines will be canceled.

For more information on routes and schedules, visit trimet.org or call 503-238-RIDE.

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