

Local Free Clinic Praises UCSD Undergrad Volunteers

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Making a difference: From the left — Kathleen Antolin; Sarah Lorentz, Pharm, D., Joshua Ocegueda; Nancy Martinez; Andrew Lin; Adele Wilson (HOPE coordinator); Lara Hamadani; Tracy Yep, and Wonita Youm. Student volunteers not pictured are Larry Arias and Tien Khieu. Photo courtesy of Father Joe's™ Villages.

Despite their busy academic schedules, a group of bioscience undergraduates at the University of California, San Diego are making a significant impact on patient care as volunteers at the St. Vincent de Paul Village Family Health Center, a free local clinic known for its dedication to providing care for the homeless and uninsured.

Some of the undergraduates - students in UCSD's Healthcare Opportunities Preparation and Empowerment (HOPE) pre-health program - have even taken it upon themselves to reinstitute a way for patients at the health center to receive free prescription medications, prescribed by clinic staff, directly from drug manufacturers. As a result, this initiative, known as the Patient Assistance Program, or PAP, has saved the health center tens of thousands of dollars since 2006 in prescription drug expenses while greatly assisting patients.

"UCSD student volunteers are stellar, and the time and effort they devote here are making a real difference in the care we provide to our patients," says Roslyn Rawlins, volunteer coordinator for the family health center. The center, the largest free clinic in the area, is located on the outskirts of downtown San Diego, where it provides close to 40,000 homeless and uninsured patient encounters a year through a comprehensive network of on-site health care services which include family medicine, internal medicine, pediatric medicine, prenatal care/gynecology, dentistry, psychiatry and optometry/ophthalmology.

The clinic is the medical home for the UCSD Combined Residency Program in Family Medicine & Psychiatry, and is situated in St. Vincent de Paul Village, a rambling complex dedicated to getting homeless individuals and families back on their feet. In addition to the health center, the Village is comprised of residential facilities for single women and men, and families; a full service cafeteria, an elementary school and high school, a career development center and other facilities.

Says Father Joe Carroll, president of St. Vincent de Paul Village: "UCSD student volunteers, as well as our student volunteers from other universities and colleges, bring with them a spirit of optimism, enthusiasm and youthfulness that our residents and patients, many who are going through some very tough times, really respond to. These volunteers really make a difference."

A prime example of student volunteers' "can do" attitude is the recent resurrection of the PAP program, says Rawlins, adding, "Without students' enthusiastic involvement, this never would have happened." The program has saved the clinic more than \$200,000 in pharmaceutical costs thus far in 2007, and \$60,000 during the last five months of 2006, Rawlins reports.

Up until early 2006 the PAP program had been non-operational for a lengthy period at the clinic because of the amount of time (in paperwork, record keeping and follow up) that it routinely took out of the staff's patient care duties to maintain it. PAP was reintroduced after UCSD pre-med students Kathleen Antolin and Nancy Martinez,

and pre-pharmacy student Larry Arias began their volunteer assignment, determined to find viable ways to make the program happen.

What attracted the students to volunteering and becoming involved with PAP? The chance to make a difference, says Antolin. "We saw the difference that Father Joe and the St. Vincent de Paul staff were making within the community and it inspired us," she says. Adds Martinez: The strong commitment to help the underserved was the aspect that most appealed to my goals as a future physician," she says. "Whether I was mailing out PAP applications, training a new student volunteer, or interpreting (Spanish/English) between patients and medical staff, I knew my time was well-spent at the clinic"

Working with Larry Fleet, the clinic's dispensary coordinator, and Dr. Sarah Lorentz, Assistant Professor of Clinical Pharmacy at UCSD and UC San Francisco and pharmaceutical consultant for the clinic, the students learned that several large pharmaceutical companies such as GlaxoSmithKline, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson routinely offer patients free medication through PAP initiatives, although the availability of such services is often not well known or widely circulated.

"Each individual pharmaceutical company has its own application and requirements for how patients can receive medication for free," says Antolin. "The main requirement is that patients be low-income and not have insurance covering prescription drug coverage."

Says Dr. David Folsom, UCSD Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Family & Preventive Medicine and Co-Director of Family Medicine & Psychiatry at the clinic: "There is a lot of medication that is available and easy to tolerate by patients - such as meds to treat schizophrenia, that is too expensive for a clinic like us to afford. And often there are no generic brands available. Through continued focus, organization and attention to paperwork, the student volunteers have brought back PAP. This allows us access to free medication to treat long-term patients suffering from diabetes, schizophrenia, depression and asthma, and to keep these pharmaceuticals well-stocked at the clinic.

Lorentz echoes Folsom's sentiments. "The students have such great attitudes and have worked hard to organize a program that had previously been able to help only 5-10% of the patients that it currently serves," she says.

Volunteers in the PAP program generally spend their time completing PAP applications, making sure they are properly filled out, in addition to interviewing patients, getting doctors' signatures and following up on applications that have been filled out. "And as the students volunteer they are able to learn more about careers in healthcare," says Lorentz. "They often find role models in the many physician and pharmacy trainees that they meet."

Adele Wilson, coordinator of UCSD's HOPE Program (an initiative under the university's Academic Enrichment Programs in Student Affairs), also appreciates the career-oriented exposure the clinic and the PAP experience provide her students. "Often, volunteer opportunities for pre-med and pre-pharmacy students provide very limited experiences," she says. "Students are not usually allowed to do much in a medical environment, for liability reasons. However, we felt it important that our HOPE members have a significant volunteer experience with the underserved, something that would make a real difference."

Wilson adds: "Through Kathleen's boundless enthusiasm, HOPE's original field trip to the St. Vincent de Paul Village was arranged. We were all thoroughly impressed and excited by the visit and several of our students became active in PAP as a result. As Kathleen continues to coordinate PAP, we are happy that our students are gaining one-on-one exposure to caring for the most underserved people amongst us-the homeless."

In addition to Antolin, Martinez and Arias, UCSD students volunteers at the clinic include: Tien Khieu, Wonita Youm, Tracy Yep, Lara Hamandani, Joshua Ocegueda and Andrew Lin.

Antolin encourages other university students in the sciences to volunteer at the clinic. "It's a wonderful opportunity, especially if you like helping the underserved community," she says. "You will get to interact with patients, doctors, pharmacists as well as the clinic staff, and have the chance to serve as a patient advocate, learn about prescribed medications and see how a free clinic operates." Students fluent in Spanish are also need at the clinic to translate for patients.

If interested in volunteering, please contact Roslyn Rawlins at the clinic at (619) 233-8500, ext. 1401.

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