Too Cool for School? Not Erie.

Engaging youth in their own wellness is a critical step towards ensuring that the next generation of adults takes a proactive role in their health. School-based health centers provide the opportunity to do just that. Erie has health centers housed within five Chicago Public Schools, two of which serve elementary students as well as the surrounding community, and three of which exclusively serve high school students.

Having a health center within the school not only gives peace of mind that students will be taken care of if they become ill or slip and fall. The health centers also provide a variety of resources at each step of the learning process—for students and teachers.

“What if you have three or four kids in the class that can’t sit still, and they’re disruptive? How do you handle a child that seems to be struggling in the classroom?” said Robin Varnado, Director of Adolescent and Behavioral Health at Erie. “We give classroom management tips from a behavioral health perspective. We also do some mindfulness teaching for the teachers and [provide] relaxation tips that they can bring into the classroom.”

This is especially important for high school students, who are at that pivotal point in their lives between school and the professional opportunities waiting for them after their senior year. The balancing act between maintaining good grades, participating in extracurricular activities, and obtaining passing scores in the classroom and on standardized college entrance exams can be overwhelming, but Erie’s behavioral health team is there to give students the tools to cope with their anxiety.

The school-based health centers have also been at the forefront of Illinois’ Unaccompanied Minor Law, which passed in October 2014. Before that, individuals under the age of 18 could consent to receive family planning services without a signed parental consent, but were unable to consent to receiving any other type of health care services. Since the law passed, minors are now able to receive general health care in addition to family planning services without consent from their parents. One such student positively affected by the passing of the law was Lakeview High School student, Angelica.*

Angelica’s mother had substance abuse issues, and Angelica found it difficult to live at home with her mother. She worked as a waitress every evening in addition to going to school, and was able to rent a small apartment on her own. She visited the school-based health center for her birth control needs, but until the Unaccompanied Minor Law passed was unable to go to Erie if she was sick because she did not have parental consent.

Since the law passed, Erie has been able to support Angelica with all of her health care needs. The staff at Lakeview helped to enroll her with her own insurance and introduced her to our Health Justice attorney. With the attorney’s guidance, Angelica was able to apply for independent Section 8 housing. She is a senior this year and thriving.

“These are bright and capable young people,” said Varnado. “But they need knowledgeable and patient individuals to help them navigate the public health system. We are delighted to be there to help them understand their own health, as well as their health care rights.”

*Name changed to protect patient’s privacy
Besides providing underserved patients with medical, dental, and behavioral health care on a sliding scale, Erie Family Health Center’s providers also refer families in need to Erie’s case management programs for a more personal and hands-on approach to wellness. Case managers not only work with patients in the clinic, but provide a variety of medical, nutritional, and social services to help patients achieve their wellness goals at home. Over the last several years Erie’s case management programs have grown from three to eight Erie sites—serving over 3,500 patients a year.

The Healthy Families of Illinois program assists first-time moms, who lack support and face multiple financial and social stressors. Through this program, women receive one-on-one support in their home from a Family Support Worker. The program begins during pregnancy and continues with regular home visits until the child is three years old. Family Support Workers help with mother-child bonding, educate new parents on the importance of immunizations and regular child wellness visits, and prepare parents for the next step in their lives—whether that’s going back to school to get their GED or enrolling in a job-readiness program. Parents are also encouraged to attend group sessions with other first-time parents to talk about their shared experience.

Funding challenges aside, Maria Matias, Senior Manager of Case Management Programs at Erie, expressed that the positive impact Erie’s case management team has on patients is immediate. “We have a patient in the Healthy Families of Illinois program who asked ‘Can I stay until my child is 5 years old?’ This patient would very much look forward to having her home visits every week and learning about parent-child interaction,” said Matias. “I think it just speaks volumes about the work that the family support workers do daily, whether it’s in the home or in the clinic, that patients want to continue with the program even though they’re ready to graduate from it.”

Helping Evanston Families Raise Healthy Kids

Learn how Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center is helping children in need get a healthy start in life.

Tuesday, October 20, 2015 from 7 to 8:30 pm
Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center
1285 Hartrey Avenue, Evanston

Panelists:
Lee Francis, MD, MPH President and CEO
Avery Hart, MD Medical Director
Jennifer Colleton, MD Pediatrician

This forum is hosted by the Friends of Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center.

RSVP by October 13 to rsvp@eriefamilyhealth.org or 312.432.7440.

You can also view the full invitation here.
Nurse Spotlight: Michele Shubitowski

Twenty-five years ago, Michele Shubitowski came on board as Erie’s first—and only—nurse at the Teen Health Center. At the time, it was just a small storefront in the West Town neighborhood of Chicago, and the idea that adolescents required a different model of care than adults or children was just emerging.

But Michele understood well the need for a tailored method of providing care to adolescents—especially the extremely complex adolescents that Erie typically serves.

“These aren’t just any teenagers,” said Michele of her patients. “They have a lot of baggage; they’re dealing with poverty, or state custody, or they’re learning how to become new parents—and all of this is on top of the usual teenage angst that the average teenager experiences. It’s an extra layer of hardship for them.”

Michele has led the way as Erie built its services for teens. From 2000 to 2009, she served as the Director of the Teen Center. With her input, guidance, and supervision, the Teen Center grew to accommodate a staff of two midwives, two pediatric nurses, one Family Nurse Practitioner, one Physician Assistant, and a Behavioral Health Counselor. With this strong team of clinicians, the Erie Teen Center now provides a comprehensive array services to more than 6,000 teens annually, from behavioral health care to testing for sexually transmitted diseases, and has become an essential regional resource.

Today Michele manages Title X Family Planning Services for three different Erie sites, and continues to provide care at the Teen Center. In recognition of her leadership, the Illinois Primary Health Care Association will honor Michele this October with the Danny K. Davis Achievement Award, recognizing her outstanding service to the community health center movement above and beyond the call of duty.

“Michele is a leader here—the staff looks to her for guidance each day,” said Robin Varnado, current Director of the Teen Center. “She is a thoughtful teacher and has been a mentor to each one of us, and we’re grateful for her tremendous contribution to Erie’s adolescent population.”

Michele’s empathy and tireless efforts to provide a safe, confidential, and healthy haven for Chicago’s most vulnerable teens has impacted the well-being of the entire community. An entire generation of young people has benefited from her skills, wisdom and compassion.

Donor Spotlight: Ernest Chang

A little over two years ago Ernest Chang, Strategic Initiatives Advisor at BMO Harris Bank, learned about Erie Family Health Center through his in-laws. Now he is one of Erie’s most active advocates, regularly attending Erie’s Board of Directors meetings and leading the Auxiliary Council into increasing its outreach and fundraising efforts as Council Chair. But he admits he wasn’t always interested in health care.

“Preventative health care was completely new to me,” he said. “With my family it’s always been like, ‘Oh, you have an issue? Go to the ER.’ I’d paid for health care benefits my entire life and hadn’t taken advantage of them.”

Ernest’s mother-in-law previously managed the program for high-needs students at Evanston Township High School. At the time Erie was building a new health center to serve the Evanston and Skokie communities and she was interested in tapping into Erie Evanston/Skokie as a potential resource for the students. She arranged for a meet-and-greet with President and CEO Dr. Lee Francis. Ernest came along.
“Erie struck a chord with me,” said Ernest of that initial meeting. “Being made aware that of the general lack of knowledge around health care, I thought that Erie was a really meaningful organization that I would like to support and advocate for.”

The Erie Family Health Center Auxiliary Council served as his opportunity to become more involved with Erie. The Auxiliary Council is composed of young professionals who are committed to spreading awareness about Erie’s mission. They have strategized, planned, and hosted the Eriedescence fundraiser for the past four years, raising over $160,000 for Erie’s health and wellness programs, including Erie’s award-winning HIV/AIDS program, Lending Hands for Life.

Ernest came on board in October 2013 and stepped into a leadership role on the Council in July 2014. Seeing that the Council was in need of reinvigoration, he reconnected Council members with Erie’s mission. “I think everyone would agree that we’ve made a lot of great progress,” said Ernest of his experience as Council Chair. “We’ve redefined who we are and what we do.” This September, the Auxiliary Council was proud to run alongside Erie’s Lending Hands for Life patients in the 2015 AIDS Run/Walk at Soldier Field.

Though making the time commitment to be an active advocate and volunteer can be challenging, Ernest continues to dedicate his time to Erie because of the passionate people he’s met within the organization. “Everyone has this desire to provide great service to the patients—the doctors, the nurses, administrative staff,” he said. “This is why I do this, why I’m here.”

You Can Make A Difference

Ana was worried. Her newborn son, Sam, had developed a bad rash all over his body, and was inconsolably fussy. She brought Sam to Erie Family Health Center, where his doctor recognized his symptoms as a rare milk protein allergy. Sam’s pediatrician knew that he would require a very special “elemental” formula that costs almost $40 per can.

She also knew that Ana wouldn’t be able to afford that. So – embracing Erie’s philosophy of caring for the whole patient, beyond the walls of the exam room – she personally found a donor who provided an initial supply of this expensive formula for Sam. Then, she was able to connect Ana with a supplemental nutrition program for women and children that could provide a continuing supply of the formula.

Sam is now thriving. Ana returned last month with the leftover formula that Sam no longer needs. She has asked Erie to donate the formula to another family in need.

Every donation you make helps to provide the compassionate care that patients like Baby Sam can only receive at a place like Erie Family Health Center. Donate today to spread hope and healing in your community.

Donate Now!

If you have a question regarding Individual Giving or Events, please contact Kate Birdwell at 312.432.7440 or e-mail her at kbirdwell@eriefamilyhealth.org.