Innovation moves health center beyond schoolhouse to empower youth

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Jennifer Lubell
Contributing News Writer

A “one-stop shop” health care organization in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is setting new standards in patient-centered care for economically or socially marginalized youths 12 to 25 years old.

At Corner Health Center, a young person seeking dental care, a physical exam or a social worker can find all these services under one roof.

“We’ve always been at the forefront of innovation,” said Versell Smith Jr., its executive director. For the last 38 years, the Corner Health Center’s mission has been to inspire young people to achieve healthy lives through affordable health and wellness care and education.

Many of its patients are at or below the poverty level, suffer from trauma, and often face difficulties getting health care through traditional approaches.

“When one looks at the social determinants of health, it is even more important to mitigate any of the barriers that may be there, perceived or real, for them as barriers to care,” said Smith.

Smith joined Jack Billi, MD, who serves on the board of Corner Health, during an episode of “AMA Moving Medicine” to discuss the accomplishments of this health model.

Physicians can learn from Corner Health to create their own integrated care models, said Dr. Billi, a retired professor of internal medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School and longtime AMA member.

All-in-one care under one roof

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As Michigan’s first school-based clinic, Corner Health aspired to be a full-service adolescent health center, said Dr. Billi. “They now provide a full spectrum of services,” moving away from the school environment and into storefronts.

Corner Health patients have access to primary care, mental health care and other wraparound services. If a young person is seeing a physician and needs a social worker, a walk down the hall is all that’s needed to access that service. A social worker is always on call for special needs.

“We can refer them to services or even get them signed up for therapy if that is their need,” said Smith.

Corner Health also partners with the county to help patients enroll for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children on-site.

“We see every patient”

Young people aren’t always eager to advocate for themselves or their health care, noted Smith. Corner Health empowers these young patients through guidance and education so they’re better informed about the center’s health care services.

Cost is one factor that deters care. “We see every patient regardless of their ability to pay,” he said. Corner Health also offers telehealth services to patients facing transportation challenges. “Through our patient-assistance program, we have on staff a care manager, as well as support for them so that if they can't afford their meds, then we cover those for them as well,” said Smith.

“We hear directly from our patients how much they really do value this innovative care model,” he added.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.

Trailblazer for patient-centered care

Invited to a mission tour, Dr. Billi said he was “blown away” by the variety of services. Outside of health care, Corner Health offers a food pantry, trips to the farmer’s market, and even has a theater troupe. It also holds special events for the LGBTQ+ community.
Wanting to get more involved, Dr. Billi partnered with the University of Michigan Medical School to provide physicians to Corner Health.

In Dr. Billi’s view, Corner Health is “way ahead of the curve” in creating team-based, physician-led care through its diverse team of social workers, nutritionists, counselors for maternal and infant health and others.

If you look at the patient-centered medical home model, Corner Health has been doing this all along, he noted.