

Community Clinics on the Front Lines: Health Reform, Community Organizing and Social Change

By Jim Mangia, President & CEO, St. John's Well Child and Family Centers

The health reform debate is the health and human rights question of the 21st century for our nation. Do Americans have a fundamental right to health? Is it the American people, or the health insurance industry, that will set the agenda and the plan for health reform and universal coverage?

As the struggle for health reform intensifies, it seems inherently clear that nonprofit community health centers have a critical role to play in organizing their patients and community members to have a seat at the table and play a role in the debate for health reform on the local and national level. Community health centers grew directly out of the war on poverty in the 1960s. As centers for community health, clinics have, for more than four decades, been at the center of the effort for social change.

As a member of President Obama's Health Policy Committee during his presidential campaign, I participated in several conversations about various aspects of the agenda for health reform. As the CEO of a network of federally qualified health centers serving more than 100,000 patient visits each year in downtown and south Los Angeles, I have come to learn, on the front lines, that community health centers have a critical role to play in moving a progressive health reform agenda forward. In south Los Angeles, we have begun to organize and galvanize our patients and staff as community advocates for health as a basic human right. In June, St. John's Well Child and Family Center, and a collaborative of community-based organizations convened the First Annual South Los Angeles Health & Human Rights conference. More than 700 people packed the conference center at the Natural History Museum in Exposition Park and began to craft a South Los Angeles Declaration for Health & Human Rights. More than 150 patients from St. John's attended that convening.

On August 18, 2009 more than 200 patients of St. John's joined other south Los Angeles community members and packed the chambers of the Board of Supervisors to support a proposal by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas to allocate \$350 million to reopen Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in south Los Angeles. The hospital had been closed almost two years ago, shutting down the community's only trauma center and emergency room and diverting patients in need of emergency care to hospitals five, ten and fifteen miles away. Anyone who knows the traffic in Los Angeles, knows that driving an extra five miles can determine whether a patient lives or dies. Many have died as a result of the closing of MLK Hospital. The reopening of the hospital is a critical human rights effort.

St. John's patients took time out of their days, took off work and made the trek to downtown Los Angeles to have their voices heard: "...we want our hospital reopened as a high-quality, community-centered institution!" Patients testified and expressed their support for Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas' motion to allocate the money necessary to

reopen the hospital by 2012. The motion was passed unanimously by the Board of Supervisors.

St. John's patients had an experience of victory in their fight for the right to health. And we have only just begun.

Earlier this month, several patients of St. John's sued Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Court of Appeals for his unconstitutional line-item cuts which eliminated health care benefits and services to millions of Californian's children and families. A judge ruled earlier this week, that the Governor is mandated to respond to the lawsuit.

On Saturday, August 22, close to three dozen patients attended a convening to develop the South Los Angeles Declaration of Health and Human Rights; part of follow-up activities to the Health & Human Rights Conference. This work will continue over the next three months and will culminate in an event to present the South Los Angeles Health & Human Rights Declaration on December 10 – International Human Rights Day.

A key component of President Obama's health reform initiative is a four-fold expansion of community health center sites across America. It is time for community clinics to regain the community organizing prominence which gave rise to the health care and anti-poverty movements of the last century. At St. John's, we aim to continue our work on the front lines in the war on poverty. And we will continue to work as community organizers to partner with, empower and embolden health center patients as advocates and leaders for social change.

Join us in this historic effort for health and human rights by signing up on our website: www.wellchild.org or www.southlahealthandhumanrights.org.