

## Grant Outcomes Report

### Expanding Medical and Dental Services: Challenges in an Underserved Region

#### I. Executive Summary

This \$75,148 grant to Health Ministry of the Southern Tier (HMST) supported an attempt to expand medical and dental services in an underserved region of Steuben County. HMST planned to expand services to a fifth health center site in Hornell, NY. Lack of community support and volunteers to staff the center precluded its establishment.

#### II. The Problem

According to the U.S. Census, 22,352 residents of the three counties served by HMST are uninsured.<sup>1</sup> Steuben County is a rural area with three primary population centers: Corning, Bath, and Hornell. HMST first began providing services in the Corning area, which is in southeastern Steuben County. It then expanded services to central Steuben County with the opening of the Bath health care center in 2006, but the third major population center in Steuben County—Hornell—remained underserved. Hornell is located approximately 60 miles northwest of Corning, with a population of approximately 9,000. It is a relatively poor community with 21.4% of its residents living in poverty compared to 14.6% in New York State overall in 2007.<sup>2</sup>

To address this western part of Steuben County, the United Way of the Southern Tier (United Way) and Excellus BlueCross Blue Shield of Central New York (Excellus) requested that HMST establish a fifth center in Hornell. Like the previously established sites, the Hornell site would also provide free medical and dental care to people with incomes below 200% of the Federal poverty level.

Establishing the Hornell site was planned as a joint effort of HMST, Catholic Charities of Steuben County, United Way of the Southern Tier, and Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield. Catholic Charities and United Way would provide a facility to house the health center, using the community care center concept implemented in Corning and Bath. These organizations also committed to meeting with local authorities and leaders in business and medicine to solicit support for the health center. Excellus committed funds and also reached out to the Hornell mayor—a member of its regional board—to obtain his support for establishing a center.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Small Area Health Insurance Estimates, 2006 Health Insurance Coverage Status for Counties. The 22,352 estimate reflects the number of uninsured individuals under age 65 in Chemung (8,732), Schuyler (2,462), and Steuben Counties (11,158). <http://www.census.gov/did/www/sahie/>

<sup>2</sup> City-Data.com, "Hornell, NY," City-Data.com Web site, [www.city-data.com/city/Hornell-New-York.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/Hornell-New-York.html), accessed December 2009.

#### KEY INFORMATION:

**GRANTEE**

Health Ministry of the Southern Tier, Inc.

**GRANT TITLE**

Expanded Medical and Dental Services for Uninsured

**DATES**

January 2008–December 2008

**GRANT AMOUNT**

\$75,148

### III. Grant Activities & Outcomes

The main activities of this grant involved hiring a full-time Director of Operations and Development who would identify a site for the Hornell health care center; solicit providers, nurses, dentists, hygienists, and administrative staff to volunteer their services at the new center; and identify future funds to sustain the new center. During the course of the grant, HMST succeeded in hiring a full-time Director of Operations and Development. The Director and HMST volunteers met with various groups from the Hornell community, such as St. James Mercy Hospital (Hornell's only hospital), the Wellness Council of the Southern Tier, the Bethesda Foundation (a local private funder), and the Hornell Ministerium (a local council of community ministers). The goals of these meetings were to generate grassroots support within the Hornell community for a new health care center, and to gain support for recruiting volunteer physicians, nurses, and administrative staff.

Through the assistance of Catholic Charities, United Way, and Excellus, HMST secured a physical site for the health center, the required office furniture and medical equipment, and a commitment for the first year of funding. Catholic Charities and the United Way also met with local authorities and local business and medical leaders to obtain support for the project. Excellus contacted the Mayor of Hornell, who signaled support for the project. Despite successfully obtaining space, materials, and local leadership for the new center, HMST did not succeed in rallying community support or volunteers to staff the clinic, and ultimately did not establish the new center in Hornell.

### IV. Key Findings

HMST has established volunteer health clinics in four other locales of the Southern Tier, suggesting that it has the experience and wherewithal to establish a clinic in Hornell. Several factors help explain why HMST did not succeed in establishing the Hornell clinic.

Primarily, there was a lack of Hornell-based volunteers to manage and staff the center. HMST would have needed to rely on a volunteer base in Hornell, as it does in the four other clinics, because it is unable to hire paid staff. Volunteer doctors, mid-level practitioners, nurses, and other personnel to manage the office and schedule appointments are necessary to run a clinic. Some doctors expressed interest in the clinic, but HMST was unable to obtain volunteer commitments for staffing.

HMST faced a similar challenge in establishing the Bath health center, which took two years and two false starts to finally succeed. The major obstacle in the Bath case was also a lack of qualified volunteers. Catholic Charities offered space in its offices for the health center. While a few local physicians expressed interest in volunteering in the center, HMST could not find volunteers to lead the effort and operate the center. A volunteer nurse from the Corning center eventually committed to shift

### FUNDING & RATIONALE

This project was awarded under NYSHealth's Special Opportunities request for proposals (RFP) in fall 2007. Under this RFP, NYSHealth was interested in supporting special opportunities that represented a one-time chance for an organization or group of organizations to have a large impact on the health of a group of people or to significantly improve the State's health care system. NYSHealth was especially interested in funding non-traditional or pioneering ways of making a difference through this RFP. This particular project represented a one-time opportunity to expand health services to people in western Steuben County.

#### IV. Key Findings *Cont.*

her volunteer time to Bath and a local community volunteer and civic leader, Mike Slovak, offered to manage the Bath center. These two volunteers, together with the physicians, provided enough initial staff to get the Bath center started.

The difficulty in obtaining volunteer support in Hornell may be partly explained by members of the Hornell community questioning the need for a new health care center. Some members of the community, including some administrative personnel at the local hospital, believed all health care needs were being met by St. James Mercy Hospital's charity care policy. The CEO of St. James Mercy Hospital, who supported the HMST effort, however, did not share this position. But without the volunteer administrative core, medical volunteers could not be used, even if they were available.

Another related factor is that Hornell is "a very close community that takes great pride in being self-sufficient," said HMST Past Board President Gilchrist. According to Gilchrist, Catholic Charities, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Red Cross have encountered similar issues in trying to serve the Hornell community. The Catholic Charities office, which opened in 2008, had years of difficulty getting established until it found a local office manager to hire there. While difficult to explain, there seems to be resistance to organizations that are not centered in Hornell.

Availability of medical liability insurance can also be a barrier to staffing a clinic. All doctors and mid-level practitioners who volunteer at a HMST center must have their liability insurance extended to practice with HMST. If the doctor is in private practice, his or her insurance carrier must be willing to extend coverage to the volunteer situation. If the doctor works within a medical system or a hospital, that institution must allow the doctor to be covered outside of his or her normal work environment. HMST has been successful with extending providers' coverage to its volunteer setting. However, the medical system provider that supplied 70% of the HMST Corning center's providers recently discontinued the extension of liability insurance. Corning must now either find and pay for the high-cost insurance to cover these volunteers or identify new providers who bring their own insurance coverage—not an easy task in a community dominated by the medical system provider. For a nominal cost, HMST does purchase liability insurance for nurses who do not have their own.



## V. The Future

HMST, Catholic Charities of Steuben County, and the United Way of the Southern Tier continue to encourage the creation of some form of free health care for the uninsured in the community of Hornell. HMST has suspended active recruitment of volunteers to staff the facility after more than one year of active but unsuccessful efforts. HMST was successful in securing commitments for a location and start-up funding from a local foundation. HMST and its partners will offer renewed support and commitment if a volunteer base steps forward. Catholic Charities, United Way, and Excellus each still has the possibility of a HMST medical center in their strategic plans. The main obstacle is to identify two or three key volunteers in Hornell to replicate the Bath experience. Given the Bath experience, HMST is hopeful that it will eventually succeed in Hornell.

It is clear that there is still a need for more access to affordable or free medical and dental care for the poor of Steuben County. Even at its current growth rate, HMST is only able to serve a fraction of the eligible population. HMST is working to bolster services provided through its existing clinics. For example, HMST has begun implementing a centralized electronic medical records database application to support all four of its sites. In 2008, even without opening the Hornell center, HMST increased its patient visits to 2,700.



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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

### ABOUT THE GRANTEE

The Health Ministry of the Southern Tier (HMST) is a nonprofit, volunteer organization of medical, dental, and auxiliary staff providing health care services free of charge to uninsured individuals with an annual family income below 200% of the Federal poverty level. HMST is a federation of four medical care centers: one in Chemung County (Elmira); two in Steuben County (Corning and Bath); and one in Schuyler County (Watkins Glen). The Corning facility also includes a dental clinic. In 2006, the four clinics provided 2,476 patient visits. Sixty percent of those served were women, and 56% were less than 50 years of age.

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### GRANT ID #

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