

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

FOCUS: HEALTH CARE

## Giving the have-nots a shot at healthy lives

**There's a growing trend in the area of doctors and churches joining to provide care in the neediest communities**

By HENRY L. DAVIS  
News Medical Reporter  
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Derek Gee/Buffalo News Dr. Myron Glick attends to a patient in his recently opened second office of Jericho Road Family Practice, at Resurrection Health Center, on Genesee Street.

Dr. Myron Glick is not waiting for the government to fix the nation's health care system.

Seven years ago, he opened his Jericho Road Family Practice in Buffalo's lower West Side, proving that a doctor willing to forgo the big bucks could succeed in a poor neighborhood.

A few weeks ago, Glick - with the help of Resurrection Lutheran Church - opened a second office in the heart of the city's neglected East Side, where a private medical practice is rarer than an endangered species.

A new doctor's office doesn't usually merit much attention, but Glick is part of a small yet growing trend in

this region of physicians and churches banding together to provide care in the neediest communities.

Other faith-based health centers are in the works here, mirroring similar efforts in urban areas across the nation. All share a common theme: increasing concern over the pervasive health disparities in the United States, especially among minorities and the working poor.

"I'd like to say that what we are doing will make a difference, but the problems are much bigger than us. All you can do is take a step forward," said Glick, whose Mennonite parents helped operate schools and a health clinic in an isolated village in the Central American country of Belize.

In Buffalo's inner city, the ranks of the poor and uninsured are rising, forcing more families to make trade-offs between medical, food and housing expenses. Rates of heart disease, diabetes and other chronic conditions have reached epidemic proportions. Infant mortality is high.

Meanwhile, one health clinic after another has closed in recent years. Far too often, residents turn to hospital emergency rooms for treatment. In some neighborhoods, there's one primary care physician for every 32,000 people. That's a ratio one might expect in Afghanistan.

"It's almost like a Third World country in terms of doctors and patients," said the Rev. Charles "Chick" Biegner Jr., retired pastor of Resurrection Lutheran Church at Genesee and Doat streets.

Biegner made it his mission to reclaim the church's historical commitment to care for the poor. Through the years, he and the congregation have been undaunted by the depressing stretch of empty lots, boarded-up storefronts and dilapidated houses that surround them.

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The church bought the brick building next door for \$25,000 - a former branch library and then community center - and refurbished it for \$80,000.

Biegner hooked up with Dr. Chet Fox, who was searching for a place where University at Buffalo medical students could get experience working with poor patients. Three years ago, they started the Lighthouse Free Medical Clinic.

It's only open 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesdays but already has treated nearly 1,200 different people. The newest wrinkle is free classes to learn how to cook nutritious meals. "Today, we have more medical students willing to volunteer than we can accommodate," said Fox. "We're exposing them to the problems."

But Biegner's vision demanded a full-time doctor's office, and Glick's practice now serves as the anchor for what's called the Resurrection Health Center.

The center also includes the Samaritan Pastoral Counseling Center for mental health issues, a free chiropractic clinic offered by the New York Chiropractic College in Depew, and the African-American Smoke Free-dom Project, an outreach program of the Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

There are plans to offer dental services.

"This is a tough neighborhood to make a go of it, but this congregation has taken on the risk. That's a badge of honor," Biegner said.

To start with, you need physicians and other medical professionals passionate about serving the poor and willing to accept that they'll do well but won't earn as much as their colleagues elsewhere.

Resurrection isn't charging Glick rent or utilities for the first year. The congregation, with the help of donations, supports the wraparound services that Glick's practice can't afford to offer. And, if an uninsured patient can't pay an entire office visit fee, the congregation makes up the difference.

The Christian Community Health Fellowship, a national organization that disburses faith-based government grants, also supplied money to help buy office equipment and allow Glick to install a computerized medical chart system for his two-site practice.

By word of mouth, news of the new office is spreading in a neighborhood that Biegner and others are trying to reclaim one building at a time.

"For me, it's convenient," said Dale Dunn, a 52-year-old patient from the Lovejoy-Bailey area who came recently for an appointment.

One of the first patients to walk into the East Side practice was a man with a preventable ulcerous lesion on his toe, a complication of diabetes. He worked nearly full-time but didn't receive health coverage and couldn't always afford medication.

With the staff's help, he enrolled in a pharmaceutical company's prescription drug assistance program to supply him with insulin. But he'll likely lose the toe.

### Serving the poor

How can they succeed when clinics operated by large organizations have failed?

### Medical gap widening

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The case sticks in the mind of Paul Violanti, the nurse practitioner who sees many of the patients. Violanti has done medical missionary work around the world, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Nicaragua and the Philippines. He has seen extreme poverty. But it's the widening medical gap here between the haves and have-nots that bothers him.

"My grandfather used to ask me what we did on a mission when we ran out of medicine. Well, the answer is, we left," he said. "Here, you have to see the people again and again, and it hurts. Those other countries have such limited capabilities. In the U.S., we don't."

The partnership between Resurrection Lutheran and Jericho Road makes for a nice story, but it may also reflect an emerging grass-roots movement in Buffalo.

Harvest House, a ministry and spirituality center in South Buffalo, is planning a large health center on the East Side in partnership with a host of groups, including Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church in Clarence.

Glick is eyeing a third site in partnership with his church, RiveRock, which serves the Black Rock and Riverside communities.

The Research Center for Stroke and Heart Disease, a part of the Jacobs Neurological Institute in Kaleida Health, is trying to expand a successful health program that works with faith communities to reduce cardiovascular disease by encouraging congregants to exercise, eat more nutritious meals and stop smoking.

Cardiovascular disease, which includes heart attacks and stroke, is the No.1 killer in the Buffalo Niagara region, and rates in the inner city are among the highest in the nation.

Faith-based health care appears to be gaining ground nationwide. Churches, synagogues and other places of worship in the last decade have been moving to fill the gap, said Mark J. DeHaven, an expert on faith-based health care at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

"Faith-based groups are already adept at caring, so health care is already in line with their traditional work," DeHaven said. "And, if they don't do this, then who will?"

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