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BEYOND THE QUADS

PROJECT HELP

Students help South Side families access services they need to stay healthy.

University of Chicago students help South Side families access services they need to stay healthy through Project HEALTH, a nonprofit organization affiliated with universities in six American cities. Since Chicago's Project HEALTH began in October 2006, it has expanded from 12 undergraduate volunteers working at one site to 50 volunteers at three. These volunteers help connect about 500 families per year to childcare, GED classes, housing, legal assistance, and food.



Fourth-year Danae Roumis staffs Project HEALTH's Family Help Desk.

Chicago Project HEALTH Site Director Emily Brice, AB'06, and current fourth-year Dave Whitsett founded Project HEALTH at Chicago after being approached by Executive Director Rebecca Onie, who started the organization at Harvard University in 1996. Onie originally planned a chapter at Northwestern University, but University of Chicago students were much more interested. "Poverty and health issues stare people in the face here on the South Side," Brice says. "Students want an outlet to make an impact on the community in a sustained way."

Thirty students attended the first Project HEALTH information session on a cold night close to final exams. One of those students is Glory Song, currently a third-year. "Through Project HEALTH, I am not letting myself be confined to academia and theory," Song says. "Project HEALTH is putting theory into practice." Volunteers like Song donate a minimum of six hours per week, and the organization's leaders spend 20–40 hours on the program. Song even keeps some regular clients' numbers in her cell phone so she can contact them with resources as soon as she finds them.

One particularly critical area in which Project HEALTH mobilizes undergraduates is pediatric health. "Kids who live in poverty don't have access to the same standard of care, and they don't receive holistic and integrated care," says Emily Brice. "Kids who experience food insecurity before their third birthdays are 30 percent more likely to be hospitalized."

Rigorously trained Project HEALTH volunteers staff two programs that address poverty-related children's health issues that doctors often cannot tackle during appointments. The first program, the Family Help Desk, operates out of University of Chicago's Friend Family

Health Center, the pediatric emergency room at Comer Children's Hospital, and LaRabida Children's Hospital four days a week. Clients walk up to the desk or are referred to it by doctors as part of their treatment.

Using a student-created database of human services on the South Side—the first of its kind—volunteers guide clients through the complicated processes of finding resources or applying for public benefits. They also refer clients to onsite professionals in serious cases like domestic violence, and sometimes act as advocates when clients have difficulties procuring services. Volunteers follow up frequently with clients, building relationships and engaging in creative problemsolving. “One volunteer had a client who was hoping to start her own childcare business,” Brice recalls. “The volunteer e-mailed all the resident heads to recommend her as someone who could provide childcare.”

The newest program, STRIVE, gives teens with sickle-cell disease skills to manage their treatment into adulthood through tutoring, mentoring, and social support. “Sickle-cell disease is excruciatingly painful, and is triggered by temperature or drinking too little water. The kids are smaller than their peers, sometimes jaundiced, and have often been told to stay inside. They feel isolated,” Brice says. “Our volunteers teach them to manage what is now a manageable disease and to advocate for themselves so that they are not seen as drug-seeking by doctors who are unfamiliar with the disease.” Volunteers recently took the eight teens enrolled in the program to an indoor climbing wall to help them build confidence.

Project HEALTH not only makes a difference in the lives of community members; it also affects students. Song, a premed who will spend the summer in rural China working on healthcare access for people with HIV/AIDS, says that her volunteer experiences led her to minor in human rights, and to pursue a master's in public health in addition to an MD. “Project HEALTH humbled me a lot in the sense that it changed my view and attitude toward poverty,” she says. “The awareness I adopted by volunteering in Project HEALTH rates just as significantly in my education as humanities, social sciences, and all I learned here.”—*Christine Minerva, AB '02*

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