

## Rebecca D. Onie '97-'98

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Imagine this: a family, unable to pay the rent, is about to be evicted because it has spent all of its income on medications. For Rebecca D. Onie '97-'98, CEO and co-founder of Project HEALTH, this problem had remained woefully unaddressed. Since founding Project HEALTH in 1996 as an undergraduate and expanding its reach to six U.S. cities, Onie received a MacArthur Grant this September to further her endeavors.

Onie, who also graduated from Harvard Law School in 2003, says that she first became interested in the connection between health and poverty while she was working at a legal non-profit in Boston during her freshman year. After learning of Boston University Professor Barry S. Zuckerman's work during her sophomore year, Onie approached him about addressing the problems surrounding health care for low-income families. Zuckerman advised Onie to observe patient-care practices at a hospital in Boston, during which Onie got a more intimate glimpse of the non-medical issues many patients were facing.

"I would have doctors who would tell me that they routinely have patients come in and say that the child has an ear infection, but the real issue is that the family has no food at home or lives in their car," says Onie.

With a newfound understanding of the need to address these underlying issues, Onie founded Project HEALTH, which aims to help patients access food, housing, and other basic necessities that the medical system often overlooks. With the help of its undergraduate volunteers and full-time staff, Project HEALTH reaches approximately 4,000 families on an annual basis.

"Project HEALTH is an organization that trusts students to do substantive work, but acknowledges that in order to do that, you need a serious time commitment," says Boston Executive Director Sutton E. Kiplinger.

Onie explained that her vision included "the opportunity for students to do work that is truly significant." As volunteers, students work in hospitals to connect patients to the non-medical resources they need.

As Rebecca J. Howe '11, a Project HEALTH Program Coordinator explained, "when you know you have a woman who might not be able to find a place to sleep next week, you have to be committed. There's just such a strong feeling you really want to help these families."

While the grant's monetary component is certainly significant, Onie says she is even more excited by the grant's non-quantifiable implications.

“It’s an amazing forum for Project HEALTH to be able to join the unfolding health care debate in this country and to be able to use the legitimacy of this award to raise awareness about the issues that Project HEALTH addresses,” says Onie.