

Health-Care Heroes

Robert Freund Jr.; Securing resources to serve the underserved

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With the help of Robert Freund Jr., underinsured St. Louisans have better access to health-care services than they did just five years ago.

Since 2001, Freund -- CEO of the St. Louis Regional Health Commission (SLRHC) -- and his team have achieved several milestones in securing funding to serve people who might otherwise go without care.

"Part of our role is to allocate to health centers about \$25 million for services for the underserved," he said.

He and his organization brought St. Louis ConnectCare primary-care clinics and federally qualified health centers together to provide care for the underserved. Together they formed an Integrated Health Network, which has 500 volunteers and 20 work groups focused on various health-care projects. About 300,000 people are currently receiving primary care through the network.

Fruend said that in 2001, local health resources for low-income families were in disarray. Years earlier, there had been good programs in place through the old Homer G. Phillips Hospital and various agencies. But by 2001, the system had deteriorated and the health care of several hundred thousand St. Louisans was in jeopardy. Local health authorities and organizations couldn't agree on how to provide services for the underserved population.

Fruend came to the newly formed regional health commission that year after working as a health-care consultant for Ernst and Young. His job was to somehow bring the various parties together.

"It was highly contentious here in 2001," he said. "We had some of the worst health-outcome issues in the United States."

He'd even heard stories about health officials from other cities shaking their heads in disbelief when discussing St. Louis' state of affairs. Freund said St. Louis risked losing millions in federal funding for community health centers.



Robert Freund Jr.

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But the situation is far different today. He and his staff are forging ahead with their work -- next tackling mental health programs for the underserved.

"The public mental health community saw what we've done, came to us in March and said, 'Can you do the same for us?'" Freund said.

His team is assessing local mental health infrastructure (it released a planning study this fall), developing systems to share health information on low-income residents who need care, and working on projects to help residents be health-literate and access preventive services.

The SLRHC's efforts will benefit from a \$15 million federal grant the state of Missouri has received to overhaul its mental health system.

The SLRHC has a staff of six and annual revenue of \$800,000. It's a collaboration of community leadership, local and state government and health-care institutions, with 19 commission members and 60 community and provider advisory board members. Its budget was revised upward to nearly \$1 million following the receipt of grant money this year. Freund anticipates that figure will double for 2007.

Dr. William Danforth, chancellor emeritus of Washington University, was on the committee that recommended forming the SLRHC.

"The whole group has done a terrific job in my view," he said. "Coordination of patient care, bringing health agencies to work together effectively, including the hospitals, federally qualified health centers and ConnectCare -- that's not a trivial thing. They had to agree to these changes.

"Rob is very hardworking. He understands health-care issues and makes a point of understanding what others know. He's the kind of person people should trust -- and they do."

Hospitals and health systems such as BJC HealthCare, SSM Health Care, St. John's Mercy, St. Luke's, St. Anthony's and Saint Louis University Hospital have contributed close to \$5 million in the past couple of years, and local foundations have come through as well. The SLRHC held a successful community health summit in April.

"This is a story about health care working like it's supposed to," Freund said.

He has an MBA from Washington University and teaches health administration courses there. He also serves on several local nonprofit boards.

"We are on the brink of being a national model now," Freund said. "People from Washington, D.C., Orlando, Los Angeles and other cities are calling to find out how we pulled it all together."