

Heals on wheels CareCoach has taken health care to 20,000 across county

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Lake Forest Hospital's CareCoach is unique in Lake County, but the trend of taking health screening on the road is a growing trend nationally.

The CareCoach is a common site around Lake County, traveling to 26 sites monthly providing free health screening and immunizations to anyone who walks through the doors of the 40-foot custom mobile van.

The program started in November 1999 by Lake Forest Hospital after its administrators looked at options for ways they could give back to the community, Smith said.

"We realized access to our services is an issue for many people, especially seniors," she said. "A mobile unit seemed the best way to serve the community."

For the past nine years, Smith, a Lake Villa resident, has been the driver, along with a registered nurse, providing blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol, asthma and osteoporosis screenings, immunizations and education to more than 20,000 patients.

For the past three years, nurse Terri Klowden has fielded patients through the coach's intake room and two exam rooms with the help of Smith. Screenings are offered free to anyone and immunizations are offered free to school-age children. Adults can also receive tetanus shots.

"You can see the diverse places we visit, including five food pantries, several churches, senior and township centers, the YWCA and Gurnee Public Library. We serve a broad base of different people all over Lake County, with each site visited monthly," Smith said.

Each CareCoach visitor is asked to fill out a health-risk assessment before any tests are administered. "Our main mission is to help people develop a healthy lifestyle and we have a vast library of literature to help people make lifestyle changes. We not only provide the screenings, we discuss the results and consequences, make recommendations for changes and in some cases may refer them to their physician."

In extreme cases, a patient may be referred to the ER or their Acute Care Center in Grayslake if they don't have their own physician.

"Fifty percent of our visitors have no insurance, 25 percent have private insurance and the balance have Medicaid or Medicare," Smith said. No one is ever charged for services, but we follow Medicare guidelines and guidelines for childhood immunizations."

Last year the unit fielded 3,400 patient visits. This year the total number of visits so far is 2,300.

"We are up 60 percent over the same time last year," Smith said. "I attribute that to revamping our schedule and adding new sites. All the food pantry sites have been successful, and we are seeing the greatest number of visits at **Open Arms Mission** in Antioch and Faith Food Pantry in Zion, which were added this year and at our Waukegan sites."

The unit visits at least two sites daily four days every week, with one Sunday site scheduled for the first Sunday of every month at Family First Support Center of Lake County, 208 Lake St., Waukegan.

"We are everywhere. The only cities we do not visit are Winthrop Harbor and Beach Park but we are easily accessible to those communities at nearby sites at least once each month."

The unit is about to enter its busiest time of year, August through October, because the state deadline for childhood immunizations is Oct. 15. Typical waiting time for services is 15 to 45 minutes. The mobile unit is usually at each site an average of three hours.

The complete CareCoach schedule is posted on the hospital's Web site, www.lfh.org, or by calling (847) 535-6709.