

# PROVIDENCE Journal

## **Health Centers are meeting the needs of our underserved neighbors**

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It is 8:30 a.m. on a Monday in August. The temperature is already in the 80s; later in the day, it will hit 94 degrees.

Despite the oppressive heat and humidity, a team of healthcare workers is well into their daily ritual of preparing a walk-up and drive-through COVID-19 testing site in an asphalt school parking lot in Providence.

Each of them dons a protective gown, gloves, surgical mask and cap, and lastly a face shield. As they prepare to interview and swab possible COVID-19 patients, cars start lining up on Gordon Avenue, filled with people anxious to get tested and hopefully receive positive news in the coming days.

By noon on a typical day, the team will have already tested 50 people.

When COVID-19 hit, health care providers across the nation did what they always do: they innovated and responded. The Providence Community Health Centers was the first organization in the state to open a drive-up and walk-up testing site for COVID-19. We continue to offer these critical services today, regardless of an individual's ability to pay.

The pandemic has reinforced why health centers are vital to the well-being of our communities, especially for people who have been traditionally ignored or underserved in our health system. These systemic inequities have been starkly illustrated with African Americans and Latino Americans dying from COVID-19 at a disproportionate rate. The mortality rate from COVID-19 for African Americans, for example, is more than twice that of any other racial group. These rates exist all over the country, regardless of the percentage of African Americans living in that state.

Each year, more people rely on health centers for their care. The numbers are compelling. More than 28 million people get their care at a HRSA-funded health center. One in nine children receive care at a health center. Approximately 33% of health center patients live in poverty.

In Rhode Island, the number of health center patients has steadily grown to approximately 190,000 in 2019. At The Providence Community Health Centers, we cared for more than 60,000 patients last year, providing a range of services including primary care, pediatrics, ob/gyn, integrated behavioral health, podiatry, optometry, dental care, asthma and allergy care, and express care. During the pandemic, we have continued to care for patients through phone and video calls, as well as in-person visits.

The issue of health disparities is one of the primary reasons that health centers were founded. It is also the reason our employees come to work every day: to create a healthier community.

The need for care is not going to lessen. By 2050, it is estimated that people of color will account for half of the population in America. Historical inequities guarantee that millions of these individuals will not have access to basic health care. Along with our health center colleagues across the country, we are working to address this issue.

The approach needs to be comprehensive. In recent years, we have expanded our services to address issues like mental health, food insecurity, and lack of housing and transportation, knowing the impact they have on overall well-being. We are doing this through innovative programs of our own and in partnership with like-minded organizations around the state.

This year, National Health Center Week takes place from August 9-15. It is a time to recognize health center heroes everywhere. We will also celebrate the steady progress we are making to provide care to those struggling against a health system that too often doesn't recognize or prioritize the underserved. Health centers are leading the way to ensure that a person's bank account or place of birth do not dictate the quality of health care they receive.