

FIFTY-THREE YEARS OF A GREAT IDEA

The Park Forest Health Department celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 2002. In 1952, the Board of Trustees in the brand new community of Park Forest resolved to have a public health nursing department that would focus on the needs of the community. Florence Thompson was hired as the first nurse director. The first decades of service were almost exclusively focused on the 100 or more children that arrived in the Village each week. Emily Webster clarified the mission and values of a public health nursing service led the second decade of service. She is also credited for beginning the home health agency in 1968 that expanded the service boundaries of the Health Department to surrounding communities and gained approval for the fledgling Medicare and Medicaid coverage for services. She envisioned the community aging and developed the systems to address the issues of older people who desired to remain healthy and independent into later years.

Valerie Campbell and Nina Longley shared leadership of the decade between 1975 and 1983 as nurse managers. Nina is a Village resident as well. Their major programmatic contributions included further expansion of home health services and boundaries and continued clarification of the public health mission as environmental issues continued to impact upon healthy. The community was being served a steady diet of prevention through well child initiatives and new vaccinations, as they became part of clinical practice. Screening clinics for women were initiated during this tenure as well as the first contractual relationship with Rich Township for senior screening and wellness services.

Lois Coxworth led the Department through the 1980's until 1993, continuing the expansion of home health, changing the name to Nurses Plus Home Healthcare and moving the Department from Village Hall into rented space where the Department currently resides. Lois observed the gaps in health services that existed for low-income working people and helped create the Access To Care Program that continues to thrive.

The sixth and current nurse manager is Christine Blue. The Department is currently addressing the challenges of increasing cost of service delivery in a community faced with limited resources, an issue shared by all areas of public health service. The staff continues to offer a wide menu of services aimed at prevention of illness through education, screening and intervention. In 1999 the not for profit '*Friends of the Park Forest Health Department*' was incorporated and approved for tax exempt status, allowing for grant seeking through the private sector. Three major awards have been received for program creation: Health Access to Technology for Seniors, Center For Minority Health Information and Prevention and Health Smart.

Over fifty-three years, hundreds of Professional Registered Nurses, Licensed Practical Nurses, Home Health Aides and office staff members generated the observations, ideas and work-power to make programs reality. New research, new technology plus the shifts in community demographics have kept the Park Forest Health Department an essential service for thousands of community residents. Nationally, public health service is changing gears as well. Preparedness for disasters occupies the attention of public health workers as the secondary wave of attention is aimed at prevention of chronic illnesses. Violence is identified as a public health problem.

All public health workers realize the interconnectedness between people, other living beings and the environment. A plague in Asia can arrive at our doorstep tomorrow. We are indeed a global community. This presents a bounty of challenges to all people who believe that everyone deserves a healthy life in a healthy world.