

**GRANTMAKING**

## A New Kind of Volunteer Is Improving Hospital Care

Increasing patients' health literacy. Ensuring smooth discharges. Reducing readmissions. These are some of the top goals of hospital administrators, clinicians, social workers. They are also the targets of a new breed of hospital volunteer.

That volunteerism now extends well beyond traditional roles is evident in United Hospital Fund grantmaking. At New York Methodist Hospital in Park Slope, a long history of Fund grants has enabled the volunteer department to launch innovative programs that tap the skill sets of retirees, graduate students, and other Brooklynites to help enhance quality of care and patient satisfaction.

"Successful volunteer programs match the right volunteer with the right kind of work," says Mimi Makovitzky, who has run New York Methodist's volunteer programs for more than 30 years. "The key is to ask: 'What are the hospital's needs?' 'Who is available to volunteer?' and 'What kind of work will be fulfilling?'"

### **EDUCATING NEW PARENTS**

Volunteers like Henry Spadaccini, a retired educator and school administrator who speaks four languages, are a perfect fit for New York Methodist's Step by Step Project, which began in 2008. The program trains volunteers to teach new parents with limited health literacy to recognize and understand their babies' developmental milestones, as well as possible "red flags" that may help lead to earlier diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders and developmental concerns.

Mr. Spadaccini meets with parents

while they are waiting for their child's well-baby checkup, and works with them to complete an age-appropriate milestones chart they can continue to use. He also makes note of possible concerns for the doctor, which helps facilitate a more productive visit.

"This truly uses the skills I developed during my professional career," says Mr. Spadaccini. "After all, what we're doing is *teaching*, teaching parents—many of whom are immigrants—important information and terms about child development. I always try to be as genuine, perceptive, and prepared as possible because I've learned that's the best way to build trust."

Step by Step has had marked success: parents have a clearer understanding of their children's development, and the rate of referrals to developmental and early-intervention specialists for children reached by the project was almost double that of a control group. That impact has helped inform health literacy volunteer programs in other areas of the hospital, including its medicine and pediatric clinics and infusion center.

### **SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS, REDUCING READMISSIONS**

Two other volunteer programs, also supported by Fund grants, engage volunteers to support family caregivers and help reduce hospital readmissions.

Launched in 2002, the Ambassador Program teaches volunteers—most of them multilingual and with degrees or current studies in psychology, nursing, or social work—how to help identify inpatients'



*New York Methodist volunteer Henry Spadaccini helps parents understand children's developmental milestones.*

primary family caregivers and offer critical support, advice, and educational tools.

New York Methodist's newest volunteer initiative uses intensive training for qualified volunteers to help reduce the especially high hospital readmission rate for congestive heart failure patients. Trained volunteers visit patients and their family members to ensure that they fully understand the discharge instructions a nurse has already given them, then follow up with calls within 48 hours and then weekly for 30 days—reinforcing discharge instructions, attendance at follow-up appointments, and medication plans. The hospital will evaluate the program's impact on both patient health and readmissions data and on staff and patient satisfaction. National studies have shown that repeat visits drop when patients understand and follow medical advice post-discharge.

"One of our key goals in grantmaking is to provide critical seed funding to pioneering programs, initiatives that continue, or have the potential to continue, long after the grant winds down, because they are effective and working toward the hospital's core mission," says Deborah Halper, vice president of education and program initiatives at the Fund. "New York Methodist's programs to engage and train highly qualified volunteers are perfect examples."