

Foundation for Community Health Marks 10th Anniversary

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“To thine own self be true,” Polonius advises his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” counseling the younger man on how to live an honorable and productive life.

The same admonition can apply equally to the many charitable organizations that work for the betterment of society in the tri-state region. One such body is the Foundation for Community Health, now observing its 10th anniversary.

Looking back last week, the foundation paused to celebrate with its grantees from the past decade, to mark the service of two retiring board members—the Rev. Richard Tabor and Eileen Mulligan, both of whom had served for a decade—and to receive a citation from the General Assembly honoring its work.

Following the celebration executive director Nancy Heaton said she believes the foundation has remained true to itself during its first decade.

“I came on as executive director seven months after the board started meeting,” said Ms. Heaton, “and I have to say that what was most impressive during the interview process was the vision of the board as it was constituted at that time—its members wanted to be proactive and strategic, to be big thinkers, while having the foundation be a local player. It was a fascinating balance. What I felt at our meeting last night [June 27]—and I believe our grantees felt the same way—is that sometimes leading, sometimes pushing, sometimes removing a barrier—we have been true to the kind of organization our board wanted us to be. We have just gotten more sophisticated.”

The foundation was established in 2003 in the aftermath of the sale of Sharon Hospital, a nonprofit community hospital founded in 1909, to for-profit Essent Healthcare, Inc. The community retained all the net proceeds from the sale of the hospital through the creation of a “conversion” foundation to keep the funds in the charitable sector, a process guided by then-state’s attorney general Richard Blumenthal and approved by the Superior Court of the State of Connecticut.

Mr. Blumenthal, now a U.S. senator, offered his congratulations to the foundation in March. “Your exceptional commitment to improving the physical and mental health of the people of Litchfield County is truly remarkable,” he wrote, calling the foundation “a model of how a small nonprofit organization can make a tremendous difference through research, technical assistance, advocacy, outreach and grant support.”

The original settlement was about \$16 million, in addition to the approximately \$6 million in income the foundation received from other trusts. Since its founding the Foundation for Community Health has invested \$5.3 million in non-profit organizations assisting the area's communities. The grantees must operate the programs and demonstrate that they will eventually be self-sustaining.

The net value of the foundation's assets in 2012 was \$23,394,725, with a net income from its investments of more than \$3.2 million. Although the foundation is a funder of other programs and does not actively seek donations, it can receive contributions to further its health-related goals.

"We're the funder," said Gertrude O'Sullivan, director of communications and special programs. "We work with all the local health and human services providers in our service area. They either come to us or we approach them. Sometimes we realize there is a gap [in the services provided in the region] and we invite the appropriate partners to come together and to start talking about it. It's not always about funding; sometimes it is outreach, research and development and bringing people to the table."

Among the differences the foundation has helped to facilitate have been providing transportation services for people to reach medical services; helping local residents living with chronic diseases to have access to regular medications; provision for adult oral health services, regardless of the recipient's ability to pay, at two new dental clinics; oral health check-ups for third graders in area schools, promoting behavioral health and promoting nursing careers.

"We have been able to make meaningful differences affecting the day-to-day lives of people in our community," said Ms. O'Sullivan. "For instance, we were able to fund prescription assistance to help people in our service area. We found people choosing between paying for food or oil, or paying for a prescription. It feels good when you realize that's the kind of difference you are making.

"But we haven't done that alone," she continued. "We have an incredible group of grantees and colleagues who have a wonderful 'can-do' attitude. Once we realize we have a gap, there is nothing we haven't been able to address. I don't think we have ever failed—we may not have ended up in the direction we thought we were going because of changing circumstances, but we have always made a difference."

So wither will the foundation take its charitable mission in the future? Ms. Heaton said the board followed its anniversary celebration with a short meeting. "The proposal on the table is whether we should redo what we did at the beginning," she said. "We will look at our current assessment and have someone synthesize the information and do a survey of providers. The next year will be dedicated to reviewing the current state of health care access in the community and we may refocus our priority areas. They may be the same areas, but we want to make sure we are not missing anything."

She said the foundation will certainly play a part in educating the public about health insurance

opportunities in the marketplace as health care reform becomes a reality. “Things are happening,” she commented, “and now it is here, it will be easier for people to focus on what is relevant for them. We want to make sure outreach efforts are appropriate for our area, which is different from urban areas. We want to have information available.”

The foundation’s catchment area includes the region served by Sharon Hospital: Canaan, Cornwall, Warren, Falls Village, Goshen, Kent, Lakeville, Norfolk, Salisbury and Sharon in Connecticut and Amenia, Ancram, Copake, Dover Plains, Millbrook, Millerton, Pine Plains, Stanfordville, Wassaic and Wingdale in Dutchess County, N.Y.

