

Promising Practices Report: Community Outreach & Education Efforts of the Metta Health Center program within Lowell Community Health Center



Lowell Community Health Center (LCHC) is a Health Resources and Services Administration-funded health center located in Lowell, Massachusetts. Established in 1970, LCHC provides multilingual and culturally appropriate services to the medically underserved communities in greater Lowell. Over 90 percent of patients are low income, more than two-thirds are racial and ethnic minorities, and nearly half of all patients are best served in a language other than English. To meet the multi-cultural needs of their patients, the health center employs bilingual providers; approximately 60 percent of staff are bilingual, providing services in 25 different languages. These languages include Khmer, Laotian, Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, French, Mandarin, Hindi,

and Swahili among others. The health center has been recognized by the Office of Minority Health as an exemplar provider of culturally competent care; meeting and exceeding all the standards set forth in the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health Care. LCHC's mission is *"to provide caring, quality and culturally competent health services to the people of Greater Lowell, regardless of their financial status; to reduce health disparities and enhance the health of the greater Lowell community; and to empower each individual to maximize their overall well being."*

METTA HEALTH CENTER PROGRAM

United States Census data indicate that Lowell is home to the second largest Cambodian population (about 25,000 residents) in the country, after Long Beach, California.¹ Last Census estimates indicate that there are about 105,000 residents in Lowell with residents of Southeast Asian descent comprising roughly one-third of the area's population. Recognizing the language and cultural barriers to accessing health care services for the

¹ United States Census Bureau/American FactFinder. <http://factfinder2.census.gov>

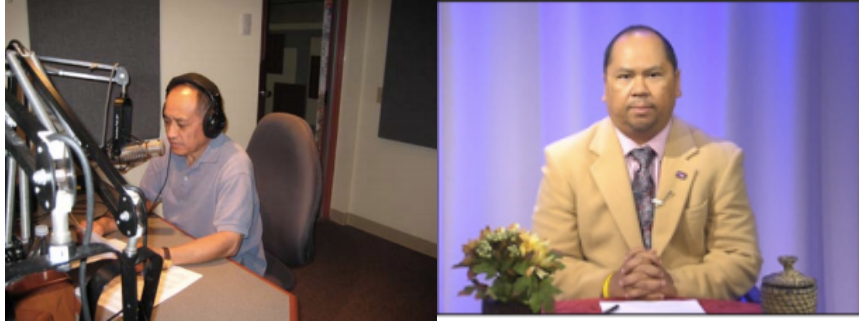
Cambodian and other Southeast Asian residents, Lowell Community Health Center established the Metta Health Center (MHC) program in 2000 to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate care. Metta means loving, kindness, and compassion in Pali, a Buddhist language. Prior to the creation of the Metta Health Center, there were 300 Southeast Asian Patients receiving care at LCHC, and today there are about 10,000 patients seen at MHC. As one of the nation's few fully integrated East Meets West health center, MHC provides primary care, mental health care and Alternative medicine services such as acupuncture, meditation, massage therapy and traditional healing consultation. These services address patients' mental, spiritual, and physical health through Eastern and Western treatment traditions. Today, the MHC program serves Cambodians, Laotian, and Vietnamese patients as well as and other populations newly arriving in Lowell including Burmese, Iraqis, Bhutanese, Congolese, Somalian, Syrian and others.



IN-LANGUAGE COMMUNITY OUTREACH & EDUCATION

Community outreach and education have been key activities of the Metta Health Center program since its inception and are important contributors to its success. Cambodian community members experienced multiple barriers to care; they had a history of trauma and torture, fear and limited understanding of western medicine, different beliefs about disease causes and prevention, felt discomfort in western settings and navigating the complex health care system as well as language and transportation barriers. Compounding these barriers were health care providers' inexperience of Cambodian health beliefs and cultural practices. As a result, MHC staff, members of the Cambodian community themselves, developed and implemented multi-pathway outreach and education models to overcome the barriers and bring the community into care. Some outreach activities included: visiting temples to inform the community members of available services and provide health education

resources; speaking with trusted community members such as elders and Buddhist monks about the importance of utilizing health care services; partnering with other Cambodian organizations such as the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association and local ethnic media; sponsoring community events; connecting immediately with newly arriving refugees. Staff also provided education to other health care and social service providers, researchers, local pharmacists about Cambodian culture, health care beliefs and health care needs.



Pictured above: (L) Sonith Peou, Director of Metta Health Center speaking on a radio program. (R) Sidney Liang, Director of Mass in Motion- Civic Engagement for Lowell Community Health Center on Jivit Thmey.

Among the most successful outreach and education strategies were the development and production of a weekly TV show and radio segments. MHC's assessment of the community had not only revealed limited English proficiency but also limited literacy in Khmer. Taking into account the literacy level as well as community feedback on their ethnic media consumption patterns, staff planned a media strategy to supplement in-person outreach. The weekly radio segment is a 15-minute broadcast on Sundays through the Voices of Cambodian Children program. The Voices program's mission is to educate and preserve the rich Cambodian heritage, culture, tradition and arts through the process of democratic education. It was created to serve the needs for information to fellow Cambodians locally as well as internationally. Health center staff provides information on different health topics and share strategies for healthy living.

A more comprehensive outreach and educational program is the weekly cable news show, called Jivit Thmey or "New Life" in Cambodian. It is aired on the local community access television station. Designed, hosted and produced by MHC staff, the show provides a combination of local news, health education and social issues of importance to the community. The show is presented in-language and a simultaneous translator present for invited guests who do not speak Cambodian. Topics can range from chronic diseases to tips for surviving the New England winter and the meaning and tradition of Christmas lights. Examples of health related topics include diabetes, diabetes self-management, depression and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To date, there have been 560 episodes of Jivit Thmey.

MHC staff credit these media based outreach and education activities with dramatically boosting visits to the health center. They saw 4,000 in the first 5 years of the program and MHC currently serves about 10,000 patients. Patients continually thank staff for providing information on TV and share links to episodes to families back in Cambodia. Aside from increased satisfaction, self-management goal setting have increased for patients with depression and diabetes. And those with depression and PTSD have seen improvement. However, it is difficult to attribute these outcomes directly and solely the radio and TV programming interventions. Adequate funding for these critical services is an issue since they are not re-imbursable; current support comes from a patchwork of grants from multiple funding sources. Staff time dedicated for these activities are usually in-kind; staff can spend 16 hours or more on 1 episode of Jivit Thmey: 2 hours for taping, 4-6 hours for post production, and 8 or more hours on research, translation and reporting.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAM INFORMATION

Please contact Sidney Liang at Lowell Community Health Center for information on the development of culturally tailored health education through the use of radio and public access TV programming.

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