

Assisting International and Local Communities Through a Number of Volunteer-Based Healthcare Initiatives

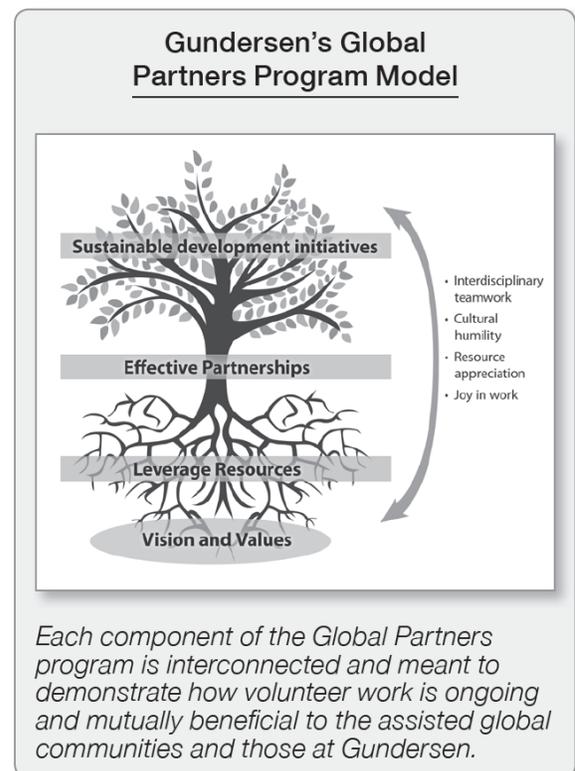
Often, providers and staff pursue a career in healthcare because of their desire to help patients. Amid daily tasks such as updating patients' EHRs and attending departmental meetings, however, it can be difficult for medical and administrative staff to remain engaged in their work, which may negatively impact care quality. To ensure staff engagement and to maintain or improve areas such as patient safety, some healthcare organizations have started local, national, and international volunteer programs. By doing so, institutions may be able to aid communities that lack certain healthcare services and reconnect employees to their reason for being part of the healthcare industry in the first place.

Gundersen Health System—located in La Crosse, Wisconsin—developed Global Partners, a program that is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of several global communities by inspiring volunteerism throughout the health system and local communities. The Academy spoke with Liz Arnold, MPH—the Administrative Director for Global Partners at Gundersen Health System—to learn more about how the program leverages resources and develops effective partnerships to create sustainable initiatives in local and international communities.

"Gundersen has the capacity to expand beyond our typical borders and service area and use our resources to benefit under-resourced communities around the world," Arnold says. "I would even go so far as to say we have a responsibility to help these communities because we are incredibly blessed with the resources we have been given as an organization."

Building the Program and Fostering Partnerships

The Global Partners program started in 2008 and is part of Gundersen's medical foundation. Moreover, those involved in the program are able to easily connect with and engage multiple departments, such as the marketing, logistics, credentialing, and development offices, when necessary for support. The Global Partners office consists of an administrative director, two staff members, and a combination of paid and unpaid interns. The two staff members—one full-time and one part-time employee—mostly work on coordinating logistics for volunteer teams. Additional program participants from the health system and community contribute



to Global Partners on a volunteer basis.

The Global Partners program operates at a number of locations, with sites in Ethiopia, Nicaragua, the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, and several areas around La Crosse. Volunteers provide healthcare services and education, while assisting in community development through a variety of activities and initiatives. One of the main areas of focus for volunteers is providing training to local healthcare professionals in order for them to better serve the needs of their communities.

“We focus on this training aspect because that’s what is sustainable,” Arnold says. “You can only do so much when you’re in Ethiopia for one week. So to make a lasting impact, it’s important to have that sustainable focus and build capacity in the local system that we are in.”

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An initiative to improve cervical cancer detection throughout Nicaragua, for example, uses Gundersen staff, vendors, and La Crosse-area undergraduate students to improve screening protocols. Gundersen providers train Nicaraguan healthcare professionals on treatments and screening procedures with discounted vendor equipment purchased by donor dollars that

stays at the site. To supplement this training, La Crosse undergraduate students are currently creating curriculum and educational resources in Spanish on pelvic health for local healthcare professionals to distribute to women in rural Nicaraguan communities, which is likely to pilot in October 2017.

While Gundersen has taken the lead for this program, external partnerships have also been essential to its function. As Gundersen develops relationships with local organizations, many have been invited to help with initiatives at the volunteer sites. In fact, the school district in La Crosse, three local higher education institutions, and two rotary clubs in the community are actively engaged in Global Partners work.

Preparing and Engaging Volunteers

To ensure volunteers are prepared, Global Partners provides a series of orientation meetings that are required before participants travel to site locations. A cultural orientation session educates volunteers on the site’s history and its existing resources, as well as on general sustainability concepts and how to build cross-cultural relationships while demonstrating cultural humility.

“In a program like this, it’s important that we combat a ‘savior mentality,’” Arnold says. “Many think we are going in and saving these communities, but that’s not the case at all. We need to go in as much students as we are teachers.”

Another component of training involves educating volunteers about the specific initiative they are being assigned to work on. Because many of the volunteers are medical staff members who understand clinical aspects required to deliver care, tactical training prepares providers for the limitations and opportunities of the environment at the site. For instance, a nurse volunteer tasked with teaching Nicaraguan medical students about labor and delivery may not have recent experience in neonatal resuscitation. In this instance, Gundersen will train the nurse in neonatal resuscitation before traveling so they feel comfortable enough to deliver training confidently to the local nursing students.



Exploring the Lessons Learned

Gundersen has seen a number of positive impacts from the 24 Global Partners' initiatives at volunteer sites, as well as within the health system and community. For example, over the course of six months in the Matagalpa region of Nicaragua, volunteers on three separate weeklong teams provided over 500 comprehensive eye exams, screened over 300 women for cervical cancer, trained several providers and nurses in best cervical cancer screening practices, and taught 140 nursing students neonatal resuscitation and suturing techniques.

Furthermore, Global Partners has had a positive impact on the health system's staff and the local community. With almost 600 volunteers to date, nearly one-third of them choose to volunteer with the program again and an overwhelming majority of participants indicate they are satisfied with their volunteer experience. In fact, volunteer testimonials reveal that many feel their trip positively impacted relationships with colleagues and their professional development, resource appreciation, and overall engagement—all of which can be essential in delivering quality patient care.

"As we engage our staff in volunteering, they come back with new perspectives," Arnold says. "Whether it's a more holistic view of healthcare, cross-cultural sensitivity, more joy and engagement in their work, or even higher resource awareness on how much can be done with less resources. In that way, both the community that we served and those of us at Gundersen have mutually benefited from the program."

By creating Global Partners, Gundersen has not only fostered effective relationships in the community that make it possible to provide healthcare services and education to under-resourced sites, but also created an avenue for medical and administrative staff to reconnect with their work and patients at the bedside. For organizations looking to improve the overall health and well-being of local and international communities, the model created at Gundersen Health System can serve as a motivating example.