

V-WOW CHRONICLES

Volunteering for a Healthy Community

November 2012



West County
Health Centers

Caring for our Communities

Volunteers are WCHC's ambassadors in the community

"I love volunteering here!" says *Virginia Valente-Russa*, outreach worker and waiting room host at the Occidental Health Center. "It's the best thing I've ever done." Like other volunteers, she says she receives as much as she gives. "All the people I've run into here are top notch. And they make me feel wanted and needed, which makes me want to help even more."

Meghan Schoon, who began volunteering in 2012, echoes Virginia's enthusiasm. She admits that, as an introvert, "I was scared at first about getting out there and talking with strangers." But, after her first event tabling at the Apple Blossom Festival, her shyness gave way to confidence. She notes, "It's been good for me to learn to put myself out there and to help people at the same time."

Both volunteers promote the health centers even when they're "off duty," telling friends and neighbors about the cen-

ters' services. "That's definitely one of the goals of our program," says Volunteer Program Manager *Marty Dekay-Bemis*. "It's like you've got this pool of ambassadors, and they are waiting room hosts, they're outreach workers but they're also people in the community. Our hope is that when a neighbor says 'Gosh, I don't have medical insurance,' the volunteers will tell them about the health centers."

Marty explains that the program was created in part to enlist volunteers to help give patients greater access to health care services. Another goal, she says, is to increase patient involvement by "engaging patients more in their health care. We really love to have volunteers from the community who are intimately involved with the health centers enough to be able to really speak from their experience."

One such volunteer is *Jennifer Nichols*, who has

Volunteer Virginia Valente received the President's Volunteer Service Award for volunteering with WCHC.



"We love to have volunteers from the community."

been a patient for 17 years. Jennifer wants to correct misconceptions about the health centers. "Too many people think the health centers are only for low-income people," she says. "I want people to know that everyone can receive care here." Though Jennifer can afford to go elsewhere, she tells them, she chooses to receive her medical care at the health centers simply because "they offer the best quality care one can get."

How are patients benefiting from the volunteer program?

Marlo Carreno, Office Manager of the Sebastopol Health Center, reports that patients have told her how helpful the waiting room hosts are in informing them about services the health center provides, such as help applying for food stamps, consulting with Legal Aide and receiving Medicare counseling. Some patients, she says, are "taken aback that they're given information about programs that aren't even affiliated with the health center, and they think that's great."

"We want the health centers to be a 'medical home,'" says Marty, "a place where patients feel welcome and comfortable and have access to as much information as they need."

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