



## **Four Health Centers Unite to Take on Changes in Healthcare**

Health organizations in four corners of Los Angeles County, that could be considered competitors, have joined forces to tackle the challenges of the ever-changing landscape of healthcare.

Eisner Pediatric & Family Medical Center, Saban Community Clinic, South Bay Family Health and Venice Family Clinic have been working for the past year with consultants hired using a Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative (NSI) grant. The NSI is a funding collaborative that provides grants to help organizations form strategic partnerships to be more sustainable.

Each of the health organizations provide vital services to low-income residents, such as case management and medical, dental, and behavioral health care. Before applying to the NSI, the organizations knew of each other but only collaborated occasionally including participation in community events.

Conversations about strategically partnering started after some CEOs attended an NSI conference. Jann Hamilton Lee, CEO of South Bay Family Center, and Liz Forer, CEO of Venice Family Clinic, started drafting an application for NSI. They looped in their clinics' board members and contacted more clinics to join an exploratory partnership.

The leaders from each organization gathered at Herb Schultz' house (the former CEO of Eisner Pediatric & Family) for an informal meeting to get to know each other. They made pancakes and found similarities in their grassroots beginnings as free or community-based clinics. They also found they were all struggling to adapt to the rapid changes in healthcare, which included the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and its possible repeal. They all walked away from breakfast agreeing that joining forces would help their organizations become stronger competitors against for-profit hospitals, as well as more sustainable and impactful organizations to serve their communities.

“We decided that we would have strength in doing more projects and possibly even start a new organization that would support more care in the community, to be able to build on all of our strengths, do things differently, and be ready for all the changes that are coming forward in healthcare in Los Angeles,” says Julie Hudman, CEO of Saban Community Clinic.

The health organizations are in the middle of an exploratory phase, planning what strategic restructuring looks like for them, and working closely with consultants. Over 100 stakeholders of different levels, from board members to volunteers, participated in the planning phases. So far, they have agreed to create and integrate a health delivery system. The organizations will share best practices, such as joint staff training and data sharing, and services such as transportation and at-home care.

“We’re in phase two of our partnership and want to organize together and start our own 501(c)(3) that the four health centers would own. Through this separate organization, we would undertake projects that would benefit all four of the health centers,” says Hudman.

Board members from each health organization signed off on the creation of an umbrella organization with joint governance, named Ensemble Health. To ensure the success of this strategic partnership, the CEOs meet weekly and are in constant communication as the new idea is launched. The discussions among the leaders deal with details of how to staff, fund and organize the new joint venture to provide an integrated health delivery system.

Jann Hamilton Lee says Ensemble Health is meant to be “a hub for innovation, a place where we can research and test new ideas or technologies, explore different models of service delivery, and where we can improve our efficiencies and lower costs to have a greater impact on the community.”

Out of 20 projects they considered working on jointly through Ensemble Health, they have narrowed it down to a couple of ideas.

“We are just in the process of figuring out what those projects are and making bigger plans on them. Right now, we are looking at Telemedicine and Telehealth for access to specialists and elderly patients,” says Hudman.

Telehealth incorporates technology-based methods to enhance health care. The program is implemented in small ways through the four clinics, but not in the way they hope to implement it through Ensemble Health. This new collaborative effort will allow the health organizations to scale up their efforts and integrate new technology more effectively. Lee describes a form of Telehealth as a way of cutting down on time spent dealing with clinic bureaucracy and lack of immediate resources. This technology-driven approach could significantly increase the effectiveness of all programs, allowing clinics to serve more families, and collaboratively, make a greater impact.

“An individual clinic might not have a dermatologist on staff or they might not have a behavioral health counselor at that moment in time. But if you can use Skype or [use technology] along

those lines where you contact a specialist, you can do the consult while the patient is actually there in the room,” says Lee.

The biggest challenge is trying to step up and do something new while also running an operational entity that serves 18,000 to 20,000 patients annually. For Hudman, driving to one of the other health organizations takes about an hour and a half. Authentically partnering and building solutions together, requires a lot of meetings, not just with representatives from the health centers, but also with auditors and consultants.

“If we didn’t have the support from NSI, we might not have gotten our idea, Ensemble Health, off the ground. We are hopeful, in the next years to see the impact our collaborative efforts can make for residents across LA County!” says Hudman.