

# Care, Comfort and Hope

## Wisconsin Hospitals Community Benefits

### Charity Care

Fear of a bill should never prevent a patient from seeking care at a Wisconsin hospital. Wisconsin hospital charity care programs provided \$232 million to more than 700 patients each day in 2010. The stories that follow illustrate the deep commitment and continuing concern that hospitals have to their patients to ensure they receive the care they need regardless of their ability to pay.

#### ***Supporting the vulnerable during difficult times***

Tim, a single male in his early 20s, found himself with some health issues that interfered with his ability to perform the requirements of his employment. He needed to leave his job until his medications could be regulated and managed well enough for him to return to work safely. This process was expected to take months and Tim's employer could not wait; they needed to fill his position.

Tim had no choice but to return to his parents' home to live until such time that he would again be gainfully employed and able to be self-sufficient. Tim did contribute \$100 per month for room and board to his parents when he was able to during this time of extended illness and recuperation. Holy Family Memorial granted Tim 100 percent assistance for his medical bills through the *Community Care* Program. By doing so, Holy Family Memorial assisted him on his journey back to self-sufficiency and rejoining the workforce.

**Holy Family Memorial, Inc., Manitowoc**

#### ***A familiar face with an all-too familiar story***

Most people who are uninsured wait too long – until their pain is unbearable. Then they go to the emergency department (ED) for treatment.

One familiar face to the staff in the ED at Aurora Medical Center of Manitowoc County was admitted four times within several months. That familiar face belonged to a young woman, age 23, whose first ED visit was for dental pain due to lack of oral hygiene – a condition that had progressed into upper respiratory infections and caused her severe difficulty breathing. She was well aware that her medical bills were piling up.

The patient met with a financial counselor and revealed that she was living on her own and working part-time for an employer who does not offer health insurance for part-time employees. Luckily, she enrolled in a government program called Foodshare, which provided food stamps. Her initial thought was to work out a payment plan with the financial counselor. At that point she was encouraged to apply for Aurora's *Helping Hand* financial assistance program, which provides free or discounted care to those in need. Within weeks, the patient received news that she qualified for a 100 percent discount through the *Helping Hand* program. In addition, the financial counselor was able to link her with the local One-Stop Job Center case manager to work with her on seeking a full-time job with health benefits.

**Aurora Medical Center in Two Rivers**

#### ***ThedaCare provides financial assistance***

Brian Zenefski of Neenah always prided himself on paying bills on time. But when medical bills began to mount, the unemployed man worried about his future.

"More money going out than what was coming in," said Zenefski, 56, who lost his job in 2008.

Zenefski has numerous medical issues, such as a lung disease called sarcoidosis, and requires follow up treatments for asthma, his heart and prostate cancer, which was treated last year. With no money or insurance, Zenefski was not sure he could get the care he needed.

"It was getting to a point of just not go to the doctor and take my chances," he said.

ThedaCare's *Caring Hearts* financial assistance program accepted Zenefski, providing \$16,000 in medical assistance.

Having the assistance was a blessing, said Zenefski. "I was really happy," he said. "I did not know how I was going to take care of these bills."

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## Wisconsin Hospitals Community Benefits (continued)

Zenefski had been hesitant to accept assistance. But he knew there was no choice.

“I was just so overwhelmed,” he said, noting he made as many cuts as he could to make ends meet. “I just pictured myself being out in the street. How can I get a job when my health is so lousy?”

**ThedaCare, Appleton**

### ***The never-ending cycle***

It was a never-ending cycle for a 54 year-old divorced female patient who was a frequent patient in the emergency department (ED) at Aurora St. Luke’s Medical Center. She had 16 inpatient admissions and five ED visits in 2010, resulting from congestive heart failure and severe diabetes. The patient initially lived alone, but eventually moved in with her adult daughter as she was unable to keep a job due to her health issues.

A financial counselor met with the patient to provide a variety of assistance options, which included an application for Aurora’s *Helping Hand* program. The patient’s health had deteriorated to the point that the doctor declared her presumptively disabled, and Aurora Family Services assisted with a Title 19 application. Although the patient was approved for coverage in the future, all of her previous dates of service were not covered by Title 19. The patient was approved for 100 percent coverage through Aurora’s *Helping Hand* program for the dates of service not eligible for coverage by Title 19. The bills, a total of nearly \$190,600, were covered by Aurora’s *Helping Hand* program.

**Aurora St. Luke’s Medical Center, Milwaukee**

### ***Once healthy Pewaukee resident caught off guard with serious infection***

At age 31, Brian Matthews was young and healthy and didn’t worry much about not having health insurance. Between being in and out of work in a tough economy and trying to get a small business off the ground, the Pewaukee resident says he just couldn’t afford it. But in May 2011, Brian admits he was caught off guard when he developed a serious infection in his lower right leg. It was swollen to twice its normal size when he finally sought medical treatment at the Wheaton Franciscan – Elmbrook Memorial Emergency Department in Brookfield.

Quickly diagnosed with cellulitis, Brian was hospitalized for nearly two weeks while he underwent antibiotic treatment and two separate surgeries. He was told the condition could have been deadly at that point.

“It’s enough to be stressing over your health, and then I was worrying about the financial part and what I’d face later. I knew right away this would be expensive,” Brian shared.

Fortunately, Brian was able to qualify for Wheaton’s *Community Care* program, which paid for 100 percent of his care. Cris Liebhauser is the Wheaton Franciscan financial counselor who assisted him with the application. She said, “When I walked into Brian’s room and saw how painful his leg looked, the first thing that came to mind was that I had to help him.”

“I’m incredibly relieved and very grateful for the help. This was my first time ever needing to be in a hospital. In my case, the financial assistance really saved me. More than a month later, I’m still in outpatient treatment and I don’t know what I’d do without it.”

**Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare – Elmbrook Memorial, Brookfield**

### ***At the end of her rope?***

Life can be challenging enough when you are unemployed and trying to make it through day by day, but imagine the struggle when a diagnosis of cancer is added to the equation.

One woman, who was unemployed and facing foreclosure on her home, had just sold valuable family memorabilia to try to save her home and also support the family. Shortly thereafter, she was diagnosed with cancer at Aurora West Allis Medical Center. Her doctor ordered tests and procedures that needed to be done as soon as possible.

Through tears she told the financial counselor, “I am at the end of my rope.”

The financial counselor guided her through the application process for the Aurora *Helping Hand* financial assistance program. The patient received wonderful news that she was eligible for a 100 percent discount for all the procedures she needed

The financial counselor said, “Just knowing that she had a light at the end of the tunnel, someone helping her and providing her guidance, is at least one less stress in her life. I am so glad to be able to help her concentrate on the most important thing, and that is for her to fight for her life and beat that cancer.”

**Aurora West Allis Medical Center**

**Submit community benefit stories to Mary Kay Grasmick, editor, at [mgrasmick@wha.org](mailto:mgrasmick@wha.org).**



Read more about hospitals connecting with their communities at [www.WiServePoint.org](http://www.WiServePoint.org).