Cooking For a Cause

Out of all the ways that we can manage our health, consuming fruits, vegetables, and whole grains on a daily basis seems like a no-brainer.

But shopping for whole foods—especially on a tight budget—is difficult for the majority of America, including Erie’s patients.

That’s where Erie’s Cooking Matters program comes in. “Share Our Strength’s Cooking Matters” is an organization that teaches volunteers across the nation to lead a six-week healthy cooking class. Since 1993, Cooking Matters, in collaboration with thousands of volunteer teachers has taught more than 265,000 low-income families learn how to eat more mindfully and nutritionally without exceeding their budget.

At Erie Family Health Center, patients are referred into the Cooking Matters program by their providers. Within a group setting, they learn cooking skills, how to read nutrition labels on food packaging, and new recipes. Before passing the course, the class takes a field trip to a local grocery store. Then, they use the information they’ve learned throughout the past six weeks to pull together a hearty meal for four people—on a $10 budget.

Lauren Fifarek, a health educator who leads the Cooking Matters classes at Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center, says that even the smallest changes in diet can be crucial to achieving overall wellness.

“Eating in season, eating fruits and vegetables that are on sale, buying fruits canned in 100% fruit juice—these are all ways to shop smart and feel better.”

This past year, one patient in Lauren’s class made a big impression on her. He was homeless, and had nowhere to store the food he made in class. Lauren and the Erie staff worked closely with him both inside and outside the health center to get him the resources he needed, including transportation, helping with housing, and a job.

“He was just so grateful for the class and the support and interaction he received from the group,” she said. “He reminded me that it really takes a tribe to influence people and make positive changes.”

Erie in the News: Federal Housing Policy Leaves Poor Kids at Risk of Lead Poisoning

When Lanice Walker moved in 2012 from public housing to a private rental in Chicago’s Austin neighborhood, she thought she finally had secured a safe, cozy place for her family to live.

Not only did the Chicago Housing Authority provide a taxpayer-subsidized voucher that paid most of Walker’s rent, the agency sent an inspector to ensure the narrow frame house had adequate heat and plumbing, working smoke detectors
and no signs of lead paint hazards.

Less than five months later, a nurse practitioner diagnosed her 4-year-old daughter with lead poisoning.

Walker knew that exposing young children to crumbling lead paint can permanently damage their developing brains, and she called the CHA to ask for an emergency move from the home on Leamington Avenue.

CHA officials turned her down. The amount of lead in her daughter’s bloodstream was 11 micrograms per deciliter, more than two times higher than the standard for medical monitoring and home inspections set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But federal housing regulations don’t require taxpayer-subsidized landlords to take action to protect poisoned children unless the level is at least 20.

“They treated me like I was nothing, like my daughter didn’t matter,” Walker said recently. If she still wanted to move, the CHA told her, she would risk losing her rent voucher to someone on a long waiting list for the Housing Choice Voucher program, commonly known as Section 8.

Medical records provided by Walker show that within the next year, while still living in the Austin rental, another daughter and one of her sons were diagnosed with lead poisoning at levels that were higher than the CDC standard but below the “environmental intervention” limit set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and followed by the CHA. The daughter’s level was 15, the son’s 10. All nine of her children eventually were found to have elevated lead levels. Yet it took intervention from a nonprofit legal aid clinic before Walker was able to move to new housing.

Her ordeal highlights a hidden problem facing Chicago families seeking a better life through federally subsidized housing. Since 2012, at least 178 other young children in Section 8 homes and apartments have fallen into the same gap Walker’s children did, according to city records obtained by the Tribune.

Responding to Tribune questions, a top CHA official said the agency will move during the first half of 2016 to crack down on landlords when children in Section 8 housing are found to have lead levels higher than the CDC standard but lower than the limit in HUD regulations. As recently as late November, the CHA had rejected requests to change its policies to match federal health guidelines.

“You're right, these standards should all match not only here but nationally,” said Katie Ludwig, acting chief of the CHA’s voucher program.

On its website, HUD declares that Section 8 families “have a right to live in housing that is safe and sanitary.” Local housing agencies are required to inspect properties before families move in and at least once a year after that.

But when checking homes for lead paint, the CHA relies on visual inspections. Inspectors for most local health departments, including Chicago’s, confirm the presence of lead with hand-held testing devices.

Landlords in the voucher program face a 24-hour deadline to fix conditions that HUD and CHA consider life-threatening, such as faulty heating, leaky roofs or missing door locks. Those who fail to comply can lose their taxpayer subsidies and be kicked out of the program altogether. CHA regulations, however, allow landlords to request extensions of indefinite length to fix lead paint hazards while still receiving taxpayer-funded rent checks.

Even when testing shows that a child has been poisoned at levels that exceed the HUD standard, landlords may take up to 30 days to scrape away peeling and chipping paint.

“This is wrong for so many reasons,” said Emily Benfer, director of the Health Justice Project at the Loyola University School of Law. “There is no incentive to eliminate hazards that can cause permanent neurological damage, and that means families are forced to continue living in the same homes where children were poisoned.”

As scientists have learned more about the dangers posed by lead, federal health officials have periodically tightened their threshold of concern. The CDC now calls for intervention when children are poisoned by just 5
micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, down from 10 during the 1990s and 30 during the 1980s.

The last time HUD updated its regulations was during the Reagan administration. It doesn’t require action until a child in subsidized housing has a lead level of 20 or higher, or until two tests at least three months apart find levels between 15 and 19.

Attorneys in Benfer’s group started representing Walker in her fight with the CHA after Martha Glynn, the family’s primary care provider at Erie Family Health Center, brought her case to their attention. In March 2014, three months after the Loyola lawyers got involved, the CHA secured the family new housing in a North Lawndale two-flat.

Benfer and Glynn also have been urging the housing agency to update its guidelines for all families in the Section 8 program, which Chicago has increasingly relied on to house low-income families after razing many of its dilapidated and dangerous public housing complexes.

In October, representatives from the Loyola/Erie partnership and the Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights attended a public hearing on the CHA’s 2016 administrative plan for Section 8. They urged housing officials to bring the agency’s policies into line with federal health standards and followed up with a letter requesting specific changes.

Ludwig, the CHA official in charge of the voucher program, didn’t respond until Dec. 17, a month after the agency approved its new Section 8 plan without making any changes. In an email to Benfer, she asked for a meeting to “get a better understanding what you are proposing.”

At the federal level, a HUD spokesman said he could not explain why several attempts to overhaul the agency’s lead poisoning standard have failed.

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Keith Ellison, a Minnesota Democrat, passed the House in 2008 but was never called for a vote in the Senate. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton sponsored a similar bill that year while serving in the Senate; it also wasn’t called for a vote.

As a young community organizer in Chicago, President Barack Obama fought to eradicate lead hazards in the Altgeld Gardens public housing project. HUD staff members have urged his administration to update the agency’s lead standard, but such a change isn’t included on the most recent list of federal rules planned during the next year.

During the past two decades, as CHA officials shifted low-income Chicagoans from high-rises to subsidized housing, they said the forced migration would make the city more diverse while giving low-income families access to better schools and safer streets. Yet most of the voucher holders live in predominantly African-American neighborhoods on the West and South sides that have given the city a national reputation for extreme poverty, violence and academic failure.

In May, a Tribune investigation found that children in those same neighborhoods continue to be harmed by lead poisoning at rates considerably higher than the city average.

Multiple studies have linked lead exposure in early childhood to struggles in school and criminal behavior later in life, leading social scientists and clinicians to conclude that lead poisoning is an underappreciated contributor to the cycle of deprivation in impoverished neighborhoods.

Chicago still has thousands of homes built before lead paint was banned nationwide in 1978. Scores of children living in older homes that haven’t been renovated remain at risk from chips of lead paint and toxic dust released as painted doors and windows are repeatedly opened and closed.

In 2012, the same year Walker’s daughter was diagnosed with lead poisoning, 21 other children in their six-block by four-block section of Austin also were found to have elevated levels, according to a Tribune analysis of city data obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

“I hear people say lead poisoning is something from the past, but I don’t see a downward trend among the families I work with every day,” Glynn said. In the past two months alone, Glynn said, she has cared for five young children on the West Side with levels
at least four times higher than the CDC standard.

CHA officials said it is unclear how Walker’s children were poisoned. They could have been exposed at a relative’s home, officials said, or the subsidized house on Leamington might not have been “adequately maintained” during the first five months the family lived there.

“This case absolutely did not fall through the cracks,” Ludwig said.

City records tell a more complicated story. Four years before the CHA cleared the way for Walker and her family to move in, a child of one of the previous tenants was poisoned with lead. In May 2008, an inspector from the Chicago Department of Public Health found “chipping, flaking or peeling lead paint” throughout the house and ordered the landlord to come up with a plan to eliminate the hazards.

The city filed a complaint with an administrative law judge and eventually negotiated a settlement that led to “substantial compliance,” according to documents in the case file.

CHA officials later added the house to the list of voucher-eligible properties. But after Walker’s daughter was poisoned, another city health department inspector found lead paint hazards in many of the same rooms that his colleague had surveyed four years earlier.

Told about the previous tenant’s child, Walker shook her head. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said.

The city health department gets involved in every case of lead poisoning in Chicago, whether or not a property is in the CHA’s program, officials said. But the department’s staff is half the size it was a decade ago, and disputed cases can take months or years to resolve.

City health officials said new hazards can emerge even after a landlord is ordered to improve a home. If an inspector considers the problem to be “minimal and isolated,” the required work can entail little more than scraping away cracked or peeling paint and painting over the area.

The CHA and city health department declared the Leamington Avenue home free of lead hazards in 2013 after requiring the landlord to make additional improvements. Another family with young children now lives there.

Authored by Michael Hawthorne. Published December 31, 2015 in the Chicago Tribune.

Buy Your Tickets to Eriedescence 2016

Come brighten Chicagoland communities at Eriedescence 2016! Dance the night away while raising funds for Erie’s health and wellness programs.

Thursday, March 10, 2016
6 to 9 p.m.

Ovation Chicago
2324 W. Fulton
Chicago, Illinois 60612

Hosted by the Erie Family Health Center Auxiliary Council. Tickets start at $65 and include food, an open bar, a silent auction, a raffle, dancing, and more! Buy your tickets here.

Helping Families Raise Healthy Kids

Hosted by the Friends of Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center, this free community event will focus on how Erie Evanston/Skokie is helping children in need get a healthy start to life.
Panlists include Erie President and CEO Lee Francis, MD, MPH; Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center Medical Director Avery Hart, MD; and Pediatrician Jennifer Colleton, MD.

Wednesday, March 2, 2016
7 to 8:30 p.m.
Health Center tours will be available.

Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center
1285 Hartrey Avenue
Evanston, Illinois 60202

Parking is available in lot on the west side of Hartrey.

Please RSVP by February 24 to rsvp@eriefamilyhealth.org, or call 312.432.7456.

Pediatrician Spotlight: Dr. Sara Naureckas

Dr. Sara Naureckas’ belief that quality health care is a right for all, not reserved for a select few, began early. Her high school summers were spent volunteering in Latin America through the Amigos de las Americas program, which inspired her to pursue a career in medicine and solidified her commitment to community health and social justice.

Board certified in Pediatrics, Dr. Naureckas is a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis School of Medicine (1987). She completed her residency at Northwestern McGaw/Children’s Memorial Hospital, Pediatrics (1991) where she served as Chief Resident. Dr. Naureckas completed a fellowship in general academic pediatrics, with an emphasis on injury prevention.

Twenty years ago, when Dr. Naureckas joined Erie Family Health, she was one of three pediatricians. Fourteen years ago she became Erie’s first Head of Pediatrics. She has been responsible for hiring all of the pediatricians who are now serving at Erie. Thanks to her leadership and contagious commitment to providing high quality health care to all, Erie has attracted top quality doctors, many of whom earned masters’ degrees in public health or served as chief residents.

Equally important, she has staffed Erie with pediatricians interested not only in treating patients medically, but in ensuring their overall health and well-being. With her guidance and support Erie pediatricians have started a running club with young patients and their families, created art fairs, and initiated the Reach out and Read program to benefit Erie patients. They also took part in the Asthma-Friendly Schools Initiatives, sponsored by the American Lung Association (ALA), to improve asthma care and integrate the ALA’s standard of care into Erie health centers.

In addition to her medical and leadership responsibilities, Dr. Naureckas is also an Assistant Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine. There, she has engaged Erie in a number of research initiatives, such as using cardiac risk factors to improve diagnosis and treatment; evaluating risk factors for domestic violence and evaluating handgun violence potential for children.

Most recently, Dr. Naureckas is providing leadership to expand access to mental health screening and treatment for Erie’s pediatric patients. Using the Pediatric Symptom Checklist, 35-40% of children are likely to screen positive for behavioral/mental health concerns. Moreover, half of all lifetime cases of mental disorders begin by age 14. Despite the prevalence of behavioral health conditions during childhood development, over 70% of those with disorders are not identified or treated. Last year, Erie Family Health Center was one of the centers chosen to develop a framework for a fully integrated primary/mental health continuum of care for children under the Illinois Children’s Health Care Foundation’s H3 Healthy Minds. Health Children. Healthy Body Initiative. Now children are routinely screened and treated for behavioral health issues. Dr. Naureckas has played an integral role in driving this program forward. “No one was doing this with kids before,” she says. “The kids needed it. It’s been very well received.”

Today Dr. Naureckas is Erie’s Medical Director for Child and Adolescent Medicine. She works closely with Erie’s Chief Clinical Officer, Dr. David Buchanan, to guide protocols and practices and assure a consistent approach to medical quality, patient satisfac-
tion and productivity across all of Erie’s health center locations. Erie and the patients we serve are truly honored and grateful to have Dr. Naureckas as an organizational provider, advocate, leader, and visionary.

**Donor Spotlight: The Hutsons & Capes**

Sandra and Dick Hutson and Norma and Bill Cape share a deep and abiding commitment to helping the less fortunate in their community.

Their dedication to ensuring access to quality health care to low-income individuals and families in Lake County is now inspiring their friends and neighbors to join them as supporters of Erie HealthReach Waukegan Health Center.

Helping those in need is a passion of Sandra and Dick Hutson, which has guided them throughout their lives together. The two met at Ball State University, studying nursing and business, respectively. Dick spent over 30 years working in sales, marketing and public relations at Hewitt Associates (now Aon Hewitt), and Sandra was an active community volunteer and homemaker, caring for their two children and later, three grandchildren. Even as their family and professional lives thrived, they were aware that many in seemingly affluent Lake County lacked the advantages they had, and they sought ways to help.

In the 1970s, a good friend introduced the Hutsons to his volunteer work at the Open Door Clinic in Mundelein. The Hutsons came to know several doctors, nurses, dentists and pharmacists who worked at the free, volunteer-run clinic. Understanding the value of the organization’s mission and bolstered by their trust in those involved, they became financial supporters of Open Door. When Open Door merged with HealthReach in 2007, they continued their legacy of support and advocacy.

“Sandra and I know about the continuing need in the US and in Lake County for medical and mental health care for the underprivileged, and that it never ends,” Dick says.

Bill and Norma Cape’s involvement with Erie Family Health Center is inspired by Bill’s long career in medicine. The two met when Norma was staffing the blood bank at Wesley Memorial Hospital (now Northwestern Memorial Hospital) while Bill was a medical intern in the 1940s. After a full career as a cardiologist and professor, and full life as parents to three and grandparents to seven children, Norma convinced Bill to retire in 2002. For four months he did not go near the hospital, instead hiking, playing bridge and traveling. But Bill missed seeing patients and practicing medicine.

A senior partner in his private practice introduced Bill to his volunteer work at the HealthReach Clinic, an all-volunteer, free clinic serving low income patients without health insurance. Soon after Bill started volunteering he became sufficiently busy practicing cardiology to work a full day per week. Inspired by the excellent work being done by community health centers like Open Door, HealthReach and Erie, Bill recently wrote a book: “Erie HealthReach Waukegan Health Center and Health Care in America Today”.

“I strongly believe that quality healthcare for everyone is cost-effective,” Bill says. “Quality health care keeps people out of emergency rooms. It gets folks back to work. Community health clinics are a big part of the solution to the need for health care for everyone.”

Erie Family Health Center absorbed HealthReach in 2014 and continued the legacy of care in Lake County. The Hutsons and Capes believe so strongly in the mission of the new Erie HealthReach Waukegan that they wanted to make sure their neighbors in the Lake Forest Place retirement community were aware of the critical need for the services being provided for low income residents of Lake County just 10 miles up the road. In December, they hosted over 120 guests at Lake Forest Place for a reception and lively program featuring Erie President and CEO Lee Francis, Erie HealthReach Waukegan Medical Director Frances Baxley, and Northwestern Medicine Lake Forest Hospital President Thomas J. McAfee. Guests were moved to hear patient stories and enjoyed learning more about Erie’s partnership with the hospital. Erie is delighted that many have since joined the Hutsons and Capes as supporters.

“Erie HealthReach Waukegan Health Center is providing high
quality health care at minimum cost to large numbers of people whose only alternative would be episodic emergency room care,” Bill says. “And this high quality care is enhanced by the strong support of Northwestern Lake Forest Hospital.”

Dick agrees: “Erie can do a great job caring for the sick and needy throughout Lake County, but the word needs to get out to the public.”

Erie Family Health Center is grateful to Bill, Norma, Sandra and Dick for being such passionate ambassadors, dedicated volunteers and loyal supporters. The residents of Lake County are healthier thanks to the support of these generous neighbors.

Save the Date: 2016 Annual Luncheon

Erie’s 2016 Annual Luncheon will bring together corporate, civic, and philanthropic leaders to celebrate the role of community health centers, as well as recognize leaders and innovators in the health care field who have made a difference in the lives of Erie patients and the community.

Friday, May 13, 2016
Four Seasons Hotel Chicago
120 E. Delaware Place
Chicago, Illinois