

# HEROs Program is a New National Model

## *Improving Practice of Primary Care and Community Health*

**W**hy do people become ill? The answers will vary from community to community, dependent on such factors as education, income, environment, and genetics. “Yet find a way to get those answers and you’ll have the key to true health transformation in healthcare reform,” says Art Kaufman, MD, vice president for the Office of Community Health.

**Health Extension Rural Offices (HEROs)**, a three-year old program developed at UNM to help tailor healthcare solutions to the unique circumstances of communities around the state, is being adapted as a national model within national healthcare reform. Its intent is to help transform primary care to improve its quality while improving the health of communities served.

Incentives in the U.S. healthcare system are unbalanced, offering greater rewards for expensive treatment in hospitals, emergency rooms, and clinics rather than basic preventive services, primary care, and behavioral health.

“That we’ve always done it this way is one reason it costs so much but performs so poorly,” says Kaufman. “But a large investment in health services won’t translate into substantial community

health improvements if we are not addressing 80 percent of the factors underlying why people become ill – these are termed the social determinants, such as poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, poor access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and high drop-out rates from school.”

HEROs began when his office pledged to better mobilize UNM’s excellent resources in healthcare, education, and research into addressing priority needs of New Mexico’s communities.

“UNM has developed model programs in communities for years. But communities told us they wanted us to stay ... not leave when a grant ended,” explains Kaufman. “We envied our agricultural colleagues whose Cooperative Extension Offices and agents were living full time in the communities they served, mobilizing university resources in response to community requests.”

Today, the first three regional HERO agents are in place – Ken Lucero works with tribal communities; Juliana Anastasoff, MS, lives and works north of Taos, and Francisco J. Ronquillo, PA, is in the south.

Since their work is driven by each community’s health priorities, the product of their labors varies by county and tribal location.

“One thing we knew in the beginning was that we didn’t want our office to look the same in four to five years,” says Wayne Powell, MA, associate director for the Center for Community Partnerships. “We needed reflection back from our communities for them to change us. We see that happening today.”

The NM Congressional delegation contacted the office when the healthcare bill was being written. UNM’s presentation on HEROS so impressed Washington planners that it became the model used in Section 5404, the “Primary Care Extension Program.” The law authorizes \$120 million a year for six years for a national demonstration project based on the HEROs model.



“We can change healthcare outcomes – but it means we change first,” concludes Kaufman. “Primary care clinical practice, training, and research – they all have to realign to change the social determinants of health.”

For more information, visit: <http://hsc.unm.edu/community/heros.shtml>.



*Francisco J. Ronquillo, PA bringing health education to a promotora-coordinated meal site in southern New Mexico.*