

**On the Road Again**

**Southcoast Health Van brings healthcare screenings, education to communities in Massachusetts where it's needed most.**

By Sandy Keefe, MSN, RN

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Susan Oliveira, MSM, BSN, RN, is one of those fortunate nurses who found her specific healthcare niche early in her career.

"I've always wanted to focus on community health, but decided after graduation to work on a neuro and stroke unit at St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford, to build my nursing skills in acute care," she said. "Then an opportunity came up at the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center, and I served as a clinic manager for adults, teens and children with a wide range of medical issues."

The two jobs gave her a breadth of knowledge about wellness, preventive health interventions and patient education. Then, she heard about a nursing position on the Southcoast Health Van.

"I thought to myself, 'I can do what I'm doing now [at the health center], only going out into the community where people live,'" Oliveira said.

It's 15 years later and today she is the team leader of the Southcoast Health Van, based out of Charlton Memorial Hospital, Fall River, MA.

**Bringing It to the People**

Five days a week, including some weekends, Oliveira comes to work early, sets up the specific screening equipment for the day's agenda, and drives to a scheduled location. The distinctive health van can be found at churches, shopping centers, businesses and health fairs throughout greater New Bedford, Fall River, Wareham and surrounding communities.

"You name it, we've been there," Oliveira laughed. "I'm open to whatever is needed by residents in the areas we serve. If I get a call and there's a space for our van, we'll be on our way."

Once the van reaches its destination, Oliveira and part-time nurse Theresa Gomes, BSN, RN, or medical assistant Alda Resendes, pop the doors open, put out signs depicting the day's event, and get to work.

"We offer free health screenings and referrals, immunizations and health education," Oliveira said. "We also conduct blood drives in collaboration with the Southcoast Blood Bank. We don't schedule appointments ahead of time, but once we open the doors, people come right in. Very often, they're looking to see how their cholesterol, blood glucose or blood pressure is doing since they've last seen their doctor. And then we have people who don't go to the doctor very often."

The van plays a key role for adolescents, offering screening and education for general health issues, as well as services related to sexual activity.

"We'll park the van at a high school, offering pregnancy testing and screening for STDs, and sharing a lot of information about sexual-related health issues," Oliveira elaborated. "A family planning counselor from the local family planning agency accompanies the youth, in case he/she needs birth control or a follow-up appointment with a healthcare provider."

**Diverse Clients**

The Southcoast Health Van serves the neediest residents within each community.

"When we're downtown doing screenings for our local ESL [English as a Second Language] program or a business association, we'll see a number of street people looking for easy and friendly access to basic health screening," Oliveira said. "We'll ask them, 'What's

going on?' and try to determine what's keeping them from seeing a primary care provider.

"Often, there are mental health issues complicating the picture in this population, and we'll refer them to social services or local health centers for treatment and follow-up."

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### **Incorporating Cultural Beliefs**

Throughout the years, Oliveira has learned a good deal about the various immigrant groups served by the van, and incorporates their cultural beliefs about healthcare into her nursing practice.

"There's a significant Portuguese community in New Bedford and Fall River, many Hispanic families live in greater New Bedford, and Fall River has a sizable Cambodian population," she said. "We see many descendants of immigrants from Cape Verde, an island off the western coast of Africa, as well as other African-Americans. New Bedford was known for its whaling and fishing industries at one point, and many people came from Africa, Brazil and other countries because of the jobs available."

Oliveira is careful to organize programs in a manner that respects the traditions and values of each religious or cultural group. "For example, many of the Cambodians spend a lot of time in their own community and don't tend to come to the hospital for preventive health," she said.

"Vaccinations are not usually a priority; so every fall, we pack up the van and head to Fall River, where we set up our immunization stations right in their temple to serve them in the environment where they feel comfortable."

Community outreach is successful only when it truly meets the needs of the people it serves.

"We work with cultural leaders, religious leaders and business leaders, trying to target the high-risk health issues within each culture," Oliveira said. "Heart disease and hypertension are prevalent among African-American men and women, for example, so a lot of our outreach is centered on cholesterol and blood pressure screening."

### **Familiar Fixture**

The van has become a familiar fixture throughout the years whenever there's a big event.

"In the summer, the Hispanic and Portuguese communities have their own health fairs and celebrations, so we book the van for those events way ahead of time," Oliveira said. "We're the only van in the communities we serve, and Southcoast Health is well-known, so people tend to be receptive to our health messages."

*Sandy Keefe is a frequent contributor to ADVANCE.*

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