



## **COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS**

### **A GOOD PRESCRIPTION FOR OUR NATION'S HEALTH**

George A.W. Smith, MD, FAAFP

Chief Medical Officer, Community Health Northwest Florida

We hear a lot in the news about how health care is changing, and not necessarily for the better. There is one bright spot in health care that has been around for more than 50 years, and the only change is that it's getting bigger and better: Community Health Centers. Our only local Community Health Center, Community Health Northwest Florida (formerly Escambia Community Clinics) has been caring for those in need in our community for over 26 years. I am proud to have been a part of this organization for 24 years, serving as Chief Medical Officer and also as a physician to thousands of our valued health center patients.

Community Health Northwest Florida is one of 50 community health centers in Florida and a part of a national network that is the family doctor to more than 27 million Americans. Our mission to provide affordable options for primary care is well established. What may be lesser known is that we are proven innovators and problem-solvers in treating chronic disease. We look beyond medical charts not only to prevent illness, but also address the factors that significantly contribute to poor health, such as poverty, homelessness, substance use, mental illness, lack of nutrition and unemployment. As a Community Centered Health Home, we work to foster partnerships and enhance community engagement. We believe that working outside the walls of the health center as an advocate for change helps to build healthier communities where children and families can thrive.

Nationally, health centers are also on the front lines dealing with complex issues: substance use disorders, including opioid addiction, low birth weights among newborns, hypertension and obesity in economically challenged neighborhoods – health conditions that, if left unchecked, end up in hospital emergency rooms for costly treatment. Health Centers save the U.S. health care system 24 billion dollars a year by managing health conditions and reducing unnecessary visits to the hospital. Locally, we work closely with area hospitals to manage and navigate those patients who continue to use local ERs for non-emergency care to our health center. Our common goal is to establish these patients in a more appropriate outpatient primary care medical home to address their many healthcare needs.



The health center model of care works by treating the whole patient with an integrated range of services, including primary care, dental care, behavioral health and wellness care, healthcare for the homeless, optometry, lab, x-ray, pharmacy assistance and other patient support services. That way, our patients, including low-income families, veterans and the elderly, need not navigate a confusing maze of services to see a dentist or to fill a prescription. Yet, all too often this happens in our fragmented system of care, even for patients who have both insurance and a regular provider. At community health centers throughout the nation, the goal is to provide everyone with easy access to care no matter who they are, where they are from, or if they have a health insurance card.

This past year, Congress, with strong bipartisan support, again invested in health centers, recognizing that a strong community-based system of care where people have easy access to doctors and preventive care will save lives and reduce health care costs. The health center model is a tested and accountable model of health care that has expanded access and provided cost effective care to our nation's most vulnerable citizens.

National Health Center Week 2018, August 12<sup>th</sup> through August 18<sup>th</sup>, provides an opportunity to celebrate the contributions of Community Health Centers throughout the nation. The theme of this year's National Health Center Week is "Celebrating Health Centers: Home of America's Health Care Heroes," but none of us who work at health centers consider ourselves heroes. Rather, we are people of the community who believe that affordable health care should always be within reach for everyone who needs it. I am very proud to serve each day with almost 300 doctors, nurses, support staff and leadership, our very own "health center heroes", who work at our fifteen health center sites throughout Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties. I invite you to learn more about community health centers by visiting our website at [healthcarewithinreach.org](http://healthcarewithinreach.org), or stop by one of our Community Health Northwest Florida sites to find out why health centers are a good prescription for our nation's health.

*Dr. Smith is board certified in Family Medicine and is also a Fellow of the American Academy of Family Physicians. He was chosen as the 2006 Florida Family Physician of the year by the Florida Academy of Family Physicians. He is past president of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians and Escambia County Medical Society.*