

Why Catholic health care matters

By Sister Judith Ann Karam, CSA

When the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine first arrived from France to the young Diocese of Cleveland in 1851, our charge from then-Bishop Amadeus Rappe was clear: To provide Catholic health care we became the city's first public health nurses. In the 158 years since, we have continued to provide health care to the people Northeast Ohio at St. Vincent Charity Hospital and St. John West Shore Hospital, and Mercy Medical Center in Canton and Providence Hospitals in Columbia, South Carolina.

What are the characteristics of Catholic health care? As every other health care provider in the community, we strive to provide clinical excellence and the latest technology and treatments. Our awards in quality of care attest to the results.

But there's more. Guided by Catholic social teaching and the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Facilities, we have a pas-

sion for respecting life and the dignity of the human person. We serve as an important safety net for the most vulnerable; we are community anchors and noteworthy parts of the social fabric of Northeast Ohio and South Carolina; and we hold up a vision of serving the common good flowing from a Gospel perspective.

As an essential component of the mission of the Church, Catholic health care is more important now than ever.

Patients and Families

Nationally, one in six patients in the United States is cared for in a Catholic hospital by the dedicated men and women, both religious and lay, who extend the healing mission of Jesus to millions of patients and their families.

Our commitment to carry on the healing ministry of Jesus calls us to provide individual attention to every person, every step of the way through their journey toward wellness.

We start from the premise when a person is ill or injured,

desire to be healed is equal to their desire to be treated with dignity and respect. Attending to the whole person, we believe in the spiritual, emotional, social and physical components of health. Spiritual care is a priority. This includes having a Catholic priest and certified chaplains of various faith traditions at each hospital.

Employees and Physicians

As a religious congregation, we are inspired daily by the commitment and dedication of our co-ministers in the laity who share our healing mission. It is a great story of Christian love being put into action right here in our own communities.

They exemplify the gospel values not only for the technical skills they bring to their job and to our patients, but also in their ability to listen attentively and compassionately, to hold a person's hand during a difficult procedure or to simply pray with them

in their time of need.

We hear of their commitment to mission and values repeatedly from our patients and their families. We use words like "caritas" or "charity" to express the loving hearts of our staff who daily are in service of others.

Community Benefit

The mission is at the heart of who we are and what we believe. Because Catholic social values are central to expressing our faith, we are called to be involved in our communities. As such, we reach beyond our walls, partnering with others to improve the health status of the communities we serve.

In 2008, the Sisters of Charity Health System provided \$46.04 million in community benefit, which includes community health services, outreach to the community and uncompen-

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sated care for those who otherwise would have no access.

We have a passion to assist those who do not have access to basic levels of health care. Through the Catholic Health Association, we have a seat at the table in the ongoing complex discussions on health reform.

Catholic health facilities frequently provide what we term "mission critical" services because of need, including psychiatric services, alcohol and drug abuse treatment, palliative care and hospice.

Although we use business acumen to operate our multimillion-dollar organizations, the heart and soul of what we do is a commitment to continue Jesus' mission of love and healing today.

We offer witness to our faith, that we should give individually and collectively to a world in need of hope, compassion and love for others rooted in a love for God.

Sister Karam is president and CEO of the Sisters of Charity Health System and St. Vincent Charity Hospital.