

Health Care Heroes - Community impact/Organization Winner

Operation Access bridges health care gap

Agency culls volunteers to offer specialty care

Premium content from San Francisco Business Times - by Sarah Thailing

Date: Friday, July 29, 2011, 3:00am PDT - Last Modified: Friday, July 29, 2011, 8:33am PDT

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Robert Marshall had never been seriously ill, but last fall he knew something wasn't right. The uninsured construction consultant was referred to Operation Access, a nonprofit organization that provides free specialty medical care to uninsured and low-income people in the Bay Area.

Medical staff volunteering for Operation Access discovered Marshall had Stage II colon cancer, and in a procedure covered by the county health department, Marshall had surgery to remove a large tumor.

“Operation Access came to the rescue just in the nick of time,” said Marshall, 64. He now has an 80 percent chance of surviving over the next five years — a prognosis that would have worsened dramatically if his cancer had progressed unchecked. “Operation Access raised the alarm, and luckily they got me when I had the best odds of surviving and making it through. With God’s help and a little luck I should be OK.”

Marshall is one of a growing number of people who have been helped by Operation Access. Since 1993, the San Francisco-based organization has coordinated \$50 million in charity care and arranged outpatient surgical care and specialty procedures for more than 6,000 patients in the Bay Area.

For people with no insurance, no money and no other options, Operation Access has helped to bridge the health care gap. At the same time, it creates volunteer opportunities for local medical professionals — from surgeons to anesthesiologists, nurses and medical technicians, all of whom donate their time.

This year the San Francisco-based organization expects to serve 1,500 patients, giving them access to outpatient surgeries and diagnostic and specialty procedures they otherwise couldn't afford. Operation Access matches more than 90 referring community clinics with more than 1,000 medical volunteers and 33 medical centers in six Bay Area counties.

“We’ve been fortunate that the hospitals have stepped up, the volunteers have come forward, and the funders and the clinics have all responded to the growing need,” said **Benjamin Aune**, Operation Access president and CEO. “Our biggest challenge is having the resources to keep up with the demand.”

With no governmental funding, the organization’s budget of nearly \$1.4 million comes entirely from corporate and foundation grants and private donations.

Whether health care reform will diminish the need for its services over time remains to be seen.

“We think there still will be people without insurance, people who are vulnerable, people who will be left behind,” Aune said. “And there will be medical providers who want to help and respond to the need.”

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Photo: Spencer Brown

“Our biggest challenge is having the resources to keep up with demand,” says Operation Access President and CEO Benjamin Aune (third from right, wearing tie).

WINNER: Operation Access HQ: San Francisco. CEO: Benjamin Aune. Heroics: Providing specialty medical care on a volunteer basis to the uninsured and underinsured.