

Massachusetts Hospital School

In the face of budget cuts, this long-term facility for children and young adults with multiple disabilities is stepping up its outreach and education efforts.

Showing What's Possible



Last year, the state of Massachusetts froze its budget and, as a result, cut funding for one of the units at the Massachusetts Hospital School (MHS). Since then, the board of trustees and the development team, led by Kathleen Kalell, foundation director, have stepped up their efforts to educate state legislatures and the community about the best kept secret in pediatric medicine for the state. And they are finally seeing some success.

MHS opened in 1907 as a residential hospital for children with severe and complicated medical challenges. Kalell said the kids at MHS fall into many different categories, but many are partially or completely paralyzed and cannot speak. The hospital aims to provide medical, habilitative, and rehabilitative services to increase the quality of life for the children and allow them the maximum level of independence possible. But the hospital is a unique hybrid that also provides recreational, educational, and vocational services—it's a fully functioning school as well as a hospital.



Kathleen Kalell,
foundation director

www.mhsf.us
HQ Canton, Mass.
Employees 209
Beds 75

State law requires that students hospitalized for more than a certain number of days receive on-site education. MHS's 75 beds are filled with residents up to 22 years old who go to school on the 166-acre campus. It also has 24 day students who attend school at the facility and 140 children who take advantage of MHS's adapted swimming pool, wheelchair sports, horseback riding lessons, and other activities during its summer program.

"Children, regardless of their capabilities or challenges, have two tasks: to be educated in school and to develop social

skills," Kalell said. "Both are important, and MHS is able to provide 24-hour support to allow these kids to excel in both."

An equally effective model

Since 1954, the state Department of Public Health has run the day-to-day operations of MHS. Its clinicians and staff work for the state, and are paid, in part, through federal Medicaid funding. Kalell and her team work for the board of trustees, raising money for the annual trip to Disney World, other excursions, and all the extracurricular activities.

In recent years, the prevailing emphasis at the state level has been on treatment and education for children with disabilities at the community level and in the home. Although Kalell agrees such an approach is ideal in many situations, she said it isn't appropriate for the children at MHS, making this unique facility an important public service.

"I conduct disability awareness programs with visiting local high schools, and whenever I ask the students if their classmate in a wheelchair attended prom, I'm met with silence," she said. "With these complex cases, we not only provide much-needed relief for families, but also cost-effective, intensive support for children that, most of the time, results in confident, capable individuals and successful integration into a public school or another community setting."

She explained that an MHS resident who sought the same services through the public schools would cost the state about \$250,000 a year and wouldn't include the benefit of 24-hour care children receive at MHS. Through the organization, the child would only need transportation services that generally run about \$30,000 a year.

There are currently 67 kids on the MHS waiting list, and Kalell said MHS has the potential to do them so much good. For example, the organization's residents don't have bedsores, even though they spend all day in wheelchairs, thanks to constant supervision and the use of advanced screening technology to continuously note pressure points and help staff keep the children comfortable.

"The same approach won't work for every case, and MHS is a remarkable public resource that vastly improves the lives of its students and families," Kalell said.

Successful outreach

After about a year of meetings with legislators and committees and visits back and forth between the State House and the campus, Kalell said the state passed two amendments to the FY2011 budget that will allow MHS to add 45 more beds,



bringing its census up to 120. The cost of the addition is estimated at \$3.5 million, but Kalell said MHS will generate more than \$4.8 million in revenue as a result.

That growth will allow Kalell and her team to act on big plans for the future. First, she'd like to provide greater opportunity for MHS clinicians and staff to bring the best practices they've learned in such an intensive care environment to other healthcare providers for children with these disabilities. By spreading best practices on teaching children to use their wheelchairs and other adaptive technology, supporting families during that often long and arduous process, the organization could bring more independence and confidence to children across the state.

Second, Kalell and the foundation have begun discussions with Margaret L. Bauman and the Ladders organization to build a dedicated environment for children with autism. Kalell said Bauman supports the philosophy that autistic children benefit tremendously from living and learning separately from their peers until they gain skills and confidence.

Third, MHS is talking with donors interested in building housing for young adults older than 22 years of age who would otherwise be placed in whatever state facility is available.

Kalell said the state ends its educational obligation to children after that age, and they often end up in less than ideal placements. MHS's lively campus and intensive care would be a much better alternative for many of them, and hopefully, it will offer assisted living in the next few years.

The work Kalell and her foundation team have been doing to reach out to legislators and the community has paid off at last; Kalell said she is thrilled about the potential of future opportunities.

"Once someone visits our campus and sees these children happy, active, and learning when they otherwise would most likely be in a more restrictive environment, they are won over," she said. "We'll continue to do our excellent work here and invite anyone to see just what is possible for some children in this kind of environment." +

—Meghan Flynn

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