DOCTOR CHICAGO  Dr. Serafino Garella
PRESIDENT, COMMUNITY HEALTH

TEN YEARS AGO, DR. SERAFINO GARELLA WAS AT THE TOP OF HIS profession. Since 1989 he had served as chairman of the department of medicine at St. Joseph Hospital on Chicago's North Side, an appointment that recognized a 30-year career distinguished by Garella's work combating kidney disease.

But in 1991, Garella had a new concern: the medically uninsured. Looking for local evidence of this national problem, he and his colleagues canvassed several Chicago neighborhoods. On four consecutive Saturdays, Garella rang almost 150 doorbells himself. "I asked those people who opened their doors what the situation of their health care was," he recalls today. "Forty percent of them had no health insurance—and they couldn't get health care."

Having diagnosed the illness, Garella concocted a grassroots remedy. In 1993, he opened CommunityHealth, a small storefront clinic on the North Side that provided free basic health care twice a week to walk-in patients. But once the clinic opened, demand for services grew. In 1999, CommunityHealth bought a 12,300-square-foot building at 2611 West Chicago Avenue, which officially opened as the clinic's new home in January 2000. The $1.3-million facility, which is open six days a week, offers a full range of health care services, including lab work and prescription drugs. As in the past, all care is free. "We don't have a billing office," says Garella. "We don't even have a sliding scale for payment."

One Saturday late last year, Garella, now chairman of the department of medicine at Lutheran General Hospital, navigated the brightly painted halls of his new clinic. He stopped to speak with everyone he met, be it a Mexican immigrant with diabetes or a busy doctor—one of the 422 volunteer physicians, nurses, administrators, and other health care professionals who donate their time and expertise to the clinic. In addition, CommunityHealth is dependent on volunteers for its funding, which is generated entirely by contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations—such as the Illinois Facilities Fund, a not-for-profit organization that provided a low-interest loan to help acquire the new building.

With the new facility up and running, Garella and his associates are looking toward the future. Anticipating 15,000 patient visits in 2001—and as many as 20,000 in 2002—they hope to expand the clinic's services, by adding, for instance, a dental program. Meanwhile, Garella, who was born in Italy in 1937 (he emigrated to the United States in 1964), remains personally committed to providing health care where it is needed most. "This country has been exceedingly generous to me," he says. "This is my way of giving back."

—Rebecca Cutler

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