

## **The Medicine Outreach Team of Coachella Valley Volunteers in Medicine: Compassion in Action**

Around 14 years ago, Rosa Lucas, FNP, Co-Founder of Coachella Valley Volunteers in Medicine (CVVIM), found herself in a small group of physicians and a nurse, all sharing a common frustration. "We were tired of feeling like we were robots, just writing prescriptions faster and faster," Rosa recalls, her voice tinged with the memories of those early days. "We needed to reinforce why we went into medicine, to find the true meaning of what we did."

This group of professionals from diverse medical backgrounds – internists, emergency department doctors, urgent care providers, and family medicine practitioners – bonded over their shared disillusionment. They found solace and inspiration in the works of Dr. Naomi Rachel Remen, particularly her writings on finding meaning in medicine.

After many meaningful discussions, Rosa and her colleagues felt a growing need to take action. By then, CVVIM was operational, and many of them were volunteering or teaching there. The idea of going out to the streets to provide basic medical aid to people who are homeless in the Eastern Coachella Valley began to take shape. However, there were some legal concerns. "We can't just go out there; we need malpractice insurance," Rosa argued.

The breakthrough that helped bring things together came when Dr. Joe Sugar, a respected figure in the community, suggested rebranding the initiative as "Homeless Medical Outreach." The name eventually garnered approval, and the team started with a modest budget of \$60 a month and a "magic box," a small plastic tackle box containing basic medical supplies.

Over the years, the Medicine Outreach Team evolved significantly. They upgraded to high-quality backpacks and began ordering medications, allowing them to provide more comprehensive care. The inclusion of medical residents from Eisenhower Health and graduate medical education programs further bolstered their capabilities.

Every Tuesday night, in good weather and bad, the volunteers break into two groups – the Orange Team and the Blue Team, based on the color of the backpack they receive – and hit the streets to help those who truly need care. It starts with a meet up at the CVVIM headquarters in Indio to set the stage for the evening. Each team is comprised of eight to 12 people, depending on who shows up.

One of the key challenges the team faces is the constant displacement of homeless individuals due to law enforcement actions, especially before major events like music festivals. Despite these obstacles, the team's deep connections with the homeless community throughout Eastern Coachella Valley help them locate and serve those in the most desperate need, often those too ill or disabled to seek help on their own.

"Our goal is not about outcomes in the traditional sense," Rosa explains. "It's about doing no harm, providing comfort, alleviating pain, and offering the best possible care under challenging

circumstances. It's very much like field medicine in the military – you work with what you have and do the best you can."

The team's dedication has earned them the respect and admiration of many, including Dr. Victor Cisneros, an emergency room doctor with Eisenhower Health. Dr. Cisneros, who brings his own personal experience of health disparities to the team, emphasizes the importance of providing the same quality of care to the homeless as to any other patient.

"My motivation starts early on. I'm a kid of immigrants," Dr. Cisneros begins. "I came here from Mexico when I was two years old. I know what health disparity is because I lived it. We didn't have access to a family doctor, and I often interpreted and translated for my parents at medical appointments. This planted a seed in me early on."

Dr. Cisneros's journey through medical school and his dedication to public health led him to the CVVIM Medicine Outreach Team. "I realized the potential to provide the same quality of care to the unhoused in Eastern Coachella Valley as we do in clinics or emergency departments. For example, seeing a homeless patient with a colostomy bag, who hadn't changed it in weeks, underscored the need for decent, respectful medical care."

Under Dr. Cisneros's guidance, the team has introduced innovative solutions like a mobile unit equipped with ultrasound technology funded by donors tied to the Eisenhower Health Foundation, providing better diagnostics and treatment in the field. "Why shouldn't the homeless population have the same quality of care?" he asks. "The mobile unit offers lighting, AC, Wi-Fi, and privacy, making examinations more dignified."

The team's commitment extends to training the next generation of medical professionals. Many of the volunteers are aspiring medical students or physician assistants who gain invaluable experience and insights from their work with the team. "Our volunteers are high-functioning individuals," Rosa proudly states. "We've helped numerous students get into medical school, and they all bring incredible dedication to their roles."

Despite the challenges, the Medicine Outreach Team continues to make a significant impact. Their work highlights the importance of thinking globally but acting locally, providing immediate, compassionate care to some of the most vulnerable members of the community. Rosa's guiding principle, "Think globally, act locally," reflects the team's mission to make a tangible difference in their community, one patient at a time.

The CVVIM Medicine Outreach Team, affectionately known as the "Street Medicine Outreach Team," operates with a fluid dynamic, responding to the ever-changing locations and needs of the homeless population. Despite the unpredictability, the team maintains meticulous records through scribes who document patient interactions and transcribe them into electronic medical records, ensuring continuity of care.

The team's work is a testament to the power of dedicated individuals coming together to serve a greater purpose. "There's a big difference between people who want to help and people who want to serve," Rosa concludes. "For us, it's about serving – because everyone we meet has something to teach us, and we have the medical knowledge to make their lives better."

Through their unwavering commitment, the Medicine Outreach Team of CVVIM embodies the true spirit of medicine – one rooted in compassion, service, and community.

