YOUR 2021 GENEROSITY
VOLUNTEERS IN MEDICINE BERKSHIRES IMPACT REPORT

Dr. Stephen M. Wittenberg, MD, Cardiologist and Volunteer Physician
2022 MA Medical Society Senior Volunteer Physician of the Year
Dear Friends,

VIM’s founders understood the impact of structural racism on people’s lives. In fact, health equity has been our north star since the day we opened our clinic. By providing comprehensive healthcare—free of charge—to adults in our community who would otherwise lack access, we’re trying to make sure that no one gets left behind...that everyone has a chance to thrive.

So how does that play out in our patients’ lives? What does their health look like when they first come to VIM? What traumas have they experienced, and what inequities do they face? How does VIM—through your generosity—make a difference?

In our 2021 Impact Report, we try to answer these questions through discussions with three people: a current patient, a VIM community health worker, and a volunteer interpreter for our behavioral health program. We hope these stories move you, and that they offer a good snapshot of the work—and heart—it takes to drive health equity.

From the board, volunteers, staff and especially the patients at VIM, I want to thank you for another year of critical, life-changing support. Your commitment is making it possible to create a culture of health in the Berkshires and beyond.

With deepest appreciation,

Ilana
Ilana Steinhauer, FNP, Executive Director

“
To reach a culture of health, we must be honest about the fact that too many people start behind, and stay behind, because they don’t have the same opportunities as others. If we don’t focus on and tackle structural racism, we simply can’t make progress toward health equity in America.”

—Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
I can’t imagine my life without VIM. VIM is one of the most beautiful gifts I have ever received.

Tell us about your background and why you came to the Berkshires.
I was a civil engineer in Colombia, working in the high-tech industry. COVID led to a huge economic crisis in my country. So I came here a year ago to create a better future for my four-year-old daughter.

Some very serious health issues brought you to VIM. Can you talk about them?
I was born with polycystic kidney disease and Marfan syndrome, two complex illnesses that affect my whole body. I have serious problems with my vision, kidneys and heart and, five years ago, had open heart surgery to replace faulty valves with mechanical ones.

How has VIM helped you?
To be honest, it’s a long list! The cardiologist saw me to manage my heart condition, and the primary care doctor sent me to a nephrologist for my kidney failure. Complications led to a series of hospitalizations. I started on dialysis, which took three full days a week. All of this limited my ability to work or provide for my family. But VIM’s Community Health Workers found funding to help me pay for rent. My health and financial problems resulted in a psychological crisis, and VIM provided the most wonderful therapist to help me manage.

Now that my health has stabilized, VIM gave me the equipment to do daily dialysis from home. They also regularly monitor my blood coagulation levels to make sure my heart is working properly.

How would you describe healthcare at VIM?
VIM isn’t only a healthcare provider; it is a family. There are so many hands at the same time saying: “You aren’t alone. We are here for you.” The whole team meets together to discuss each patient’s unique case. And everyone has this great attitude. They smile. They’re interested in serving.

VIM treats not only the clinical problems, but also the psychological and economic factors that result from them. And the care doesn’t end when you walk out the door. The medical assistants call me almost every day to check my numbers and make sure I am doing what I am supposed to do.

How are you now?
My health is much better. I have started my own transportation business, my wife is working, and our daughter is happy. Now, my home is here.

I can’t imagine my life without VIM. VIM is one of the most beautiful gifts I have ever received.
What are some of the toughest issues our patients face?
Most of VIM’s patients come to the US with nothing. No home, no job, no English, no idea of what services are available. They feel completely isolated and overwhelmed. Some are trying to reunite with children stuck at the US border. I try to put myself in their shoes and imagine how that feels.

What do VIM’s Community Health Workers do for our patients?
We provide access to the services that will help them get on their feet. We register children for medical insurance, pediatrician appointments, food pantries and school. We help patients open bank accounts so they can begin to establish credit. We help them apply for financial assistance for housing and register for SNAP and WIC [nutrition assistance programs]. We help find jobs, furniture and winter clothing. For those with children at the border, we help complete all the paperwork needed to prove that the parents will be able to take care of their children...financially and otherwise.

Sometimes, because of all the trauma they have experienced, our patients just need someone to listen. Once the immediate crises are resolved, we give them the information they need so they can begin to help themselves.

How has VIM’s social services support evolved over time?
We have introduced initiatives to help patients and their families not only survive...but thrive. For example, we work with 12 organizations, including the YMCA Camp Hi-Rock, Berkshire South Community Center, and Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary to provide summer camp scholarships for our patients’ children. Our patients work a lot during the summer, and we want to make sure they can earn as much as possible without having to worry about their children. We also partner with the Berkshire Hills School District to help the immigrant population learn how to get the most out of their school experience.

What is most gratifying about your job?
I love to see people’s lives change for the better. When a patient gets a good job or can finally buy a car. When a child becomes a legal resident. VIM provides 360° support that improves patients’ health and their quality of life. The best salary for me is when a patient calls to say “thank you.”

Marcela Urrea, Community Health Worker
What is your history with VIM?
I started as a staff member 12 years ago and became a volunteer medical interpreter once I launched my own gardening business. I moved over to behavioral health around 5 years ago, but the need really exploded when the pandemic hit.

Why has the need for behavioral health services been so much greater during COVID?
Our patients were dealing with job loss, childcare issues, and illnesses, like many others across the population. But their stress was compounded by additional challenges specific to their situations, including finding ways to continue to support family members back home and feeling extremely isolated in an unfamiliar country.

What other issues do you hear about from our patients?
Patients tend to start with behavioral health shortly after getting to the Berkshires. Many have experienced significant trauma in their home countries, on their way here, or shortly after arriving, including rape, domestic abuse, kidnapping attempts, and the fallout from economic and political strife. We focus on the acute issues first and dig deeper into the past once those are addressed.

In our patients’ cultures, therapy tends to be viewed either as something for “crazy” people or a luxury reserved for the ultra-rich. Once they try it, they realize that—at least at VIM—it’s about having people who hold a space for them, who make them feel special and cared for. For some patients, such as single mothers, the therapist and interpreter might be the only people they talk to all week.

What’s unique about behavioral health care at VIM?
Our providers—all volunteers—have a lot of experience. They combine that with the most loving, compassionate care. And, they go out of their way to make the sessions work for our patients, even talking by phone while a patient is at work cleaning a hotel room. Behavioral health at VIM in many ways provides the connection between the medical and social services and transforms the whole package into truly comprehensive care.

What are some of the greatest lessons you have learned from our patients?
Our patients have been through so much, but they are incredibly resilient. It is so inspiring to see them settle in, become a part of the community, and gain self-confidence. They prove that it is possible to come through terrible trauma and have a good life.

Claire Eurich, Volunteer Behavioral Health Interpreter
MISSION Volunteers in Medicine Berkshires provides access to free, comprehensive healthcare for income-qualified adults in the Berkshire region who are uninsured or underinsured.

VISION A society in which everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve good health.
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Gladis Rave, Senior Medical Assistant, with soon-to-be Med School student Lisa Gong

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