Mission Outreach: Caring for Patients Around the World

OSF HealthCare Newsroom
Shelli Dankoff – Media Relations Program Manager

To some it may be seen as a non-descript warehouse tucked on the backside of property owned by the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis on the northeast side of Springfield, Illinois. But to people living in third world countries half a world away, it's a lifeline to medical supplies they otherwise wouldn't have access to.

The Hospital Sisters of St. Francis came to the United States in the 1800s as missionaries to serve the poor in Illinois and Wisconsin. They developed hospitals and over time came to realize there is a tremendous amount of surplus in U.S. hospitals that could be used effectively in other, less-advantaged countries. From that Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach was born in 2002.

"The Sisters put together the abundance that we have here in the U.S. with the need that we see around the world and developed a professional way for us to export medical supplies and equipment, always focusing on quality, always focusing on relationship. We get to know the hospitals that receive our supplies and equipment. They tell us their needs and we're able to meet their needs. They draw directly from our inventory. We don't tell them what they need, we respond to what they tell us they need," explained Georgia Winson, President and Executive Director, Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach.

The Mission Outreach team can't do it alone. OSF HealthCare, also founded by Sisters and based in Peoria, Illinois, is just one of the many health systems, clinics, and medical providers donating high-quality, non-expired supplies and equipment to Mission Outreach to be shipped and used where needed.

Over the years, OSF has donated a variety of items including defibrillators, infant warmers, beds, portable x-ray machines and ultrasounds, which still have useful life but have been upgraded.

"When equipment is made available either through our bio medical department or any clinical area and they know that they can no longer use the equipment, we check with our sister hospital's just to make sure that we can't re-use the equipment and then when it's not able to be reused and we offer it up to Mission Outreach so that it can be donated to a third world country. They are able to outfit these hospitals that would not be able to get this equipment had they not gotten it through our donation," said Mike Vermillion, Vice President Supply Chain Operations for OSF HealthCare.

"I would see OSF and all the hospitals that work with Mission Outreach as expanding their patient base to meet the needs of people in all kinds a locations. I think about OSF in Rockford, in Peoria, in those locations. But in reality, OSF is making a difference in Quido, in Kenya, in Port-au-Prince Haiti, so think about it that way - OSF has patients around the world," Winson added.

In addition to medical supplies and equipment saving lives and enhancing health in developing countries, there's additional benefit for the donors because the supplies stay out landfills, which can add up in disposal costs, or be tucked, unused, in a warehouse that costs money to maintain.

OSF HealthCare and other donors also provide financial support to Mission Outreach, because shipping a 40-foot container filled with needed supplies to places like Tanzania is expensive. It can also take a long time.

Helping Hand for Relief and Development ordered supplies that included recliners used in clinic areas and other donated items from OSF HealthCare last fall. The container was loaded in Springfield on October 30, 2018 before shipping out of Norfolk, VA. It arrived at the port in Tanzania on January 9, 2019. It did not clear customs until July 22, which is longer than typical for these shipments, depending on the destination country.

But for a region of the world where 51% of the population lives in poverty, there's only one physician per 5,000 people, life expectancy for men and women is 65 years old, and infant mortality is 112 per 1,000 live births, the need – and appreciation - is great.

"Mission Outreach is really an excellent way to be able to show Christ's love to people around the world. Mission outreach has a tangible impact, but it also has an intangible impact that we're showing respect to people by the way we package the supplies, by the fact we respond to their needs," said Winson.

"It's a worthy cause. We are donating equipment and supplies to countries that would not have the availability of these products if we weren't involved," said Vermillion.

Mission Outreach also has a program in place where medical missionaries from the hospitals that work with it can select from the inventory and take up to 50 pounds per person on their medical mission trip at no cost. So in addition to taking the gift of their expertise, a nurse or a doctor is able to take supplies and equipment from Mission Outreach.

To learn more about donating supplies and equipment, requesting items for a medical mission trip, or volunteer opportunities, visit Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach.