

*As the client advocate at HealthSET, I am struck by how frequently I find myself asking, “If not us, then... who?”* HealthSET is a community health non-profit dedicated to the idea that the lives of the low-income elderly matter. We live this ideal out by providing free healthcare services to low-income elderly residing in subsidized high rise buildings throughout the Denver metro area.

HealthSET conducts health promotion clinics at 18 buildings populated entirely by seniors and disabled individuals. These clinics are a vital resource for the building residents, many of whom have no family support, few friends, and difficulty accessing the healthcare system.

Recently, I got a referral from our clinic nurses regarding a client, Esther, who missed multiple doctor appointments. I rescheduled Esther’s appointments, arranged transportation, and then accompanied Esther to each appointment – as a partner for the journey, an extra set of eyes and ears to take in information, and a voice in case she didn’t make hers heard. Esther was diagnosed with breast cancer, and then leukemia, giving us a new set of circumstances to help Esther tackle. Esther had no family able to help with decision making, with emotional, spiritual, financial support.

The reason I ask the question “If not us, then who?” so frequently is that there are systems put in place to assist the elderly, but more often than not, those are either too few or too hard to access. Many of our clients are those who have fallen through the proverbial cracks. And so we find ourselves rolling up our sleeves to help move a client to assisted living or giving them a ride to get to a can’t-miss medical appointment.

Beyond our clinics, our advocates go to medical appointments to help our clients understand the information being tossed in their direction, as well as to encourage clients to ask questions in an oft-intimidating environment. Our nurse care managers are a tireless, devoted pair, specializing in helping clients navigate new diagnoses, deal with family and social issues, and even transition into assisted living and long term care facilities. They stepped in and helped Esther deal with her cancer diagnosis, accompanied her through the surgery and post-op appointments, and when it became necessary, found a place for her in a well-respected assisted living facility where she now happily resides with occasional visits from our volunteers.

I sometimes forget that the little things make the biggest difference in the lives of our clients. Sometimes, it’s not saving their lives by catching dangerously high blood pressure (which we do) but giving them the time of day, offering a listening ear, being a friendly voice in an overwhelming world. And every once in a while, I’ll get a card, or a phone call from a client. To know that we impacted their lives, that we made them feel valuable, is enough to keep us moving, enough to continuously convince me that this is a calling, not a job and that indeed, the lives of the low-income elderly matter.