



IWS FAMILY HEALTH

ANGEL HARVEY FAMILY HEALTH CENTER
INFANT WELFARE SOCIETY *of* CHICAGO

VOICES OF CARE

DEAR FRIENDS,

Thank you for your unwavering support. We simply couldn't care for our patients with the depth and dedication we do without you by our side.

This year has brought new challenges to the heart of our healthcare home and to the 12,000 patients who count on us. The lingering effects of the pandemic have profoundly impacted our youth. In recent back-to-school check-ups, **nearly every high school student shared worries about cyberbullying, learning delays, or social pressures.** Anxiety runs high, our children need far more support than they can find at school or home. Our team of providers, nurses, care coordinators, and therapists is here to be that lifeline—helping each child find their way to a brighter future.

Yet mental health is only part of the struggle. Food insecurity is a growing barrier for many of our patients and their families, affecting everything from physical growth to emotional resilience. For too many of our patients, the uncertainty of having enough to eat impacts their daily lives. It often appears subtly—some eating only once a day or unable to afford a balanced diet.

Inspired by the Department of Health and Human Service's Food is Medicine initiative, we opened *Janie's Kitchen*, our in-clinic food pantry exclusively for IWS Family Health patients. **Over 2,000 IWS families have visited in just the past six months.** We're incredibly grateful to the Greater Chicago Food Depository for stocking our pantry weekly addressing at no cost and to the Auxiliary of IWS Family Health for providing volunteers to staff and assist guests at Janie's Kitchen.

When families lack food security, children face increased risks of birth defects, anemia, cognitive challenges, aggression, and anxiety, while adults are more likely to experience depression, diabetes, and hypertension.

One of my patients, a 14-year-old with autism, faces this reality daily. He is non-verbal, 5'11, and over 100 pounds heavier than his mother, who has no family nearby to support her. Easily overwhelmed by noise, he became anxious in a store six months ago, pushing a crying child who fell and was injured. Since then, she has been asked not to bring him back. Delivery services are costly, and she works all day, unable to shop while

her son is in school. The child's father left years ago, and they have limited options for residential support.

Stories like theirs remind us why food access is essential to health. Food is more than fuel—it is hope, stability, and dignity.

Thanks to your generosity, we can provide these young people and their families with both short- and long-term behavioral health services and nutritional support right here at IWS Family Health. Your support ensures that we can meet families where they are, addressing critical needs in mental health, nutrition, and beyond.

Enclosed, you'll find Voices of Care, which shares stories from my colleagues on our frontlines. I hope these stories show you the difference your support is making.

With deepest gratitude,

Dr. Paola Portela
Chief Medical Officer, IWS Family Health





Denise "Dee" Vidal, LCSW

NAVIGATING COMPLEX NEEDS THROUGH COORDINATED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

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“We’re the first to really engage with patients in moments of crisis,” Dee explains. “Our job is to dig deeper, understand the layers of trauma and stress they’re carrying, and provide the care they need to stabilize and begin healing.”

In a world where healthcare can often feel disconnected and overwhelming, IWS Family Health is a rare place of genuine connection and healing. At the heart of this compassionate approach is Denise “Dee” Vidal, social worker, whose work providing skills-based therapy provides a lifeline to those in need. For many patients facing intense crises, Dee and her team are the first to respond, offering support when it’s needed most. They address complex mental health challenges not only with expertise but with a profound commitment to each patient’s well-being.

Responding to a Young Girl in Crisis

One recent case highlights the critical role Dee and her team play collaborating with the medical department. A mother called IWS Family Health to schedule a pediatric appointment for her 14-year-old daughter, Emilia*. The mother was deeply concerned about her daughter’s persistent crying spells, weight loss, lack of appetite, and refusal to go to school.

Our scheduling team immediately flagged the case, recognizing that she had recently been hospitalized—two times for self-harm and once for suicidal thoughts. Dee’s team quickly reached out to the family, asking important questions to assess the girl’s mental health. Although Emilia denied any current thoughts of self-harm, she admitted she didn’t understand why she felt so sad.

During the pediatric appointment, Dr. Portela performed a comprehensive medical exam but found no physical reasons for her emotional distress. That’s when Dee stepped in for an emergency crisis interview. “We always want to know what’s changed in a patient’s environment,”

Dee says. “Sometimes it’s something recent that triggers an emotional flood.”

Through patient-led questions, Dee uncovered that she had been recently attacked, and shortly after, had been in an accident. These incidents had re-triggered deeply buried memories of a sexual assault she had experienced at the age of 10.

Building a Path to Healing

The combined traumas left Emilia overwhelmed, burdened by years of unresolved pain. Dee quickly arranged a care plan involving weekly therapy, medication management, and consistent follow-up sessions. “Our goal wasn’t just to treat her panic attacks,” Dee explains, “but to help her process the trauma and rebuild her sense of safety.”

Over time, Emilia began to heal. Her eating habits improved, she returned to school, and she started re-engaging with her peers and studies—milestones Dee celebrates. “Seeing these moments of progress is what keeps us going,” she says. “It’s about helping them live their best lives, one step at a time.”

Helping a Bullied Teen Return to School

Dee's work extends far beyond any single patient. Another case involved a 16-year-old boy, Christian* who had been bullied so severely at school that he developed crippling anxiety. His fear was so intense that he would unconsciously urinate on himself at the thought of attending class and regularly experienced panic attacks.

"We worked for weeks to unravel his fear and anxiety," Dee recalls. Over six weeks, she taught Christian coping strategies, connected him with additional resources, and worked on building his confidence. Eventually, he returned to school, no longer plagued by panic attacks, and began finding joy in his studies and friends again.

Although his journey is far from over, Dee's intervention laid the foundation for his recovery. "It's about giving them the tools to succeed, and letting them know they're not alone," Dee says.

The Power of Integrated, Compassionate Care

For Dee, each patient's journey serves as a reminder of her team's purpose. "These aren't just cases—they're people," she says. "Their struggles are real. We don't just treat symptoms; we look at the whole person, understand their environment, and guide them through healing." Every patient over the age of 12 at IWS is screened for anxiety and depression at each medical visit, and the team is actively working to expand mental health screenings to dental visits as well. This comprehensive approach has led to outstanding outcomes: **IWS achieves a depression remission rate that is double the national average for other Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) and FQHC Look-Alikes.** This level of success is one reason why the Gold Community Health Quality badge is so meaningful. **Awarded only to the top 10 percent of over 1,400 community health centers nationwide,** the Gold badge honors centers that provide exceptional primary care related to mental health, cancer, diabetes, heart health, HIV, and maternal and child health.

At IWS Family Health, this commitment to high standards goes beyond recognition. Leadership rigorously evaluates operations and health outcomes each month to ensure continuous improvement. "Our goal," Dee explains, "is not just to address immediate crises but to set patients up for long-term success. We want to help them regain control of their lives and find their way to a brighter future."

Champion Dee's Life-Saving Work

In Chicago, where 40% of students face chronic absenteeism, anxiety and depression often hold them back from school and life. Nationwide, over 20% of teens have seriously considered suicide—numbers that represent real lives at risk. **At IWS Family Health, Dee and her team work tirelessly to restore hope and stability to young people facing these struggles.**

"Your generosity allows us to bridge this gap," says Dee, referring to the \$30,000 funding shortfall needed annually to provide short-term therapy for young patients. "It offers

young people a way back—to school, to friends, and sometimes even to work. You are truly empowering their futures."

By supporting Dee and her team, you are ensuring that no young person faces these challenges alone and that each life has a chance for a brighter tomorrow.

**Names changed for privacy*



"At IWS Family Health, Dee and her team work tirelessly to restore hope and stability to young people facing these struggles."