

Alumnus Spotlight

Peter Szutu, M.P.H. '81

Suturing up patients at the Ellington Air Force Base in Texas was a routine task for Peter Szutu. True, he wasn't a doctor—hadn't even finished college at that point—but, as a medic in the late 1960s, he was called upon to provide, shall we say, a wide range of care. And he didn't hesitate. With a father who was a distinguished surgeon and a mother who had been a dean of nursing in his native China before his family escaped to the United States, Szutu had been exposed to medicine and medical procedures throughout his youth.

After developing his clinical skills at the Air Force outpatient clinic for four years and finishing college in 1972, he looked around for a way to combine his interest in medicine and his desire to bring medical care to many people. He found his answer—and the start of a pioneering career in public health—at the Beach Area Community Clinic in San Diego, serving the poor and the medically disenfranchised.

Community clinic workers had to be versatile in those early, freewheeling days, and Szutu quickly discovered he could run “a fairly good size community-based organization” that had 20,000 visits a year. “I found a different part of myself there,” he says. “Instead of treating one person at a time, I could treat a population.”

When Szutu arrived at the School of Public Health in 1979, elderly populations were not on his mind. He intended to get formal training and head right back to his surfers in San Diego. But his path changed when Grey Panther Lillian Rabinowitz, cofounder of Alameda County's first day health care program for older adults—Community Adult Day Health Services (CADHS)—asked him to serve on the board.

His commitment to CADHS took him from board membership to leadership of the organization into which it evolved. Today, Szutu is president and CEO of the Center for Elders Independence (CEI), the first program in the East Bay to incorporate a long-term health care service that enables frail seniors to live at home for as long as medically and socially feasible. Modeled after On Lok, a pioneering health care program in San Francisco's Chinatown, CEI has grown since the early '90s to include three centers with more than 360 participants and an annual budget of over \$20 million.

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Unlike other nonprofit health care services, which must limit what services can be provided or how long those services can be provided, CEI provides whatever services participants need—from home care to any medical specialist—for as long as they need it.

This care is very expensive, but Szutu has built a successful program based on two not-so-secret weapons. The first is dedicated interdisciplinary teamwork—involving a full spectrum of specialists, from physicians to nutritionists to transportation personnel.



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“Our teams meet every morning to discuss the participants they are responsible for,” he says, “and they follow each individual in every facet of their lives, including their environment. If we need to dip the dog—to kill the fleas that cause the lesions that get infected that cause the hospitalization—we dip the dog.”

The second weapon is an intense commitment to the principles he learned in the School of Public Health: prevention, maintenance, and early intervention.

“If you are able to prevent, then you don't have to pay the hospital bill,” Szutu says. “If you can maintain a person's muscle tone and strength, that person will not fall as frequently. If you can get on that cold before it becomes pneumonia, then you avoid hospitalization. We practice those types of interventions in order to achieve the results we get. Our population is the 10 percent-most frail of the Medicare population, yet our inpatient hospital utilization is less than half of the Medicare average. Investing in prevention, maintenance, and early intervention works. It's not academic. It works.” 🌀

— Vivian Auslander