It’s no surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted Berkeley’s poorest populations. They often face lingering debt, unreliable employment, and sometimes non-existent housing. The threat of the Coronavirus, combined with a lack of access to healthcare, adds even greater stress to their lives.

The situation is complicated by the fact that as the practice of medicine has evolved, specialists have replaced most family-practice doctors who sometimes saw 60 to 80 patients a day. The result has been even less access to medical care for everyone, but most crucially for the poorest among us. Many of those dedicated primary-care doctors found that their small practices were no longer sustainable.

Fortunately, in Berkeley, innovation and dedication led to a solution: LifeLong Medical Care, a community health center now serving 66,000 patients, many of whom might otherwise fall through the cracks in the medical system. Starting with eight employees, it now has more than 1,200, many of them the primary-care doctors whose practices had closed. There were originally two clinics. Now there are 16 LifeLong Community Health Centers: Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond, San Pablo, Pinole, Novato, and Rodeo.

Dr. Ron Adler has served for the past 15 years as the only physician on the Board of Directors of LifeLong Medical Care. He says, “LifeLong makes it possible for patients of limited means to access health care, dental care, and mental health and social services in a setting that makes them feel welcome and at home. Access to all these services in one place is unique to community health centers like LifeLong.”

Adler moved his family to Berkeley 44 years ago. As a new gastroenterologist, he was working at four hospitals, including Highland Hospital in Oakland. “I was impressed with the LifeLong Medical Care physicians who made rounds on their hospitalized patients,” says Adler. “They were so committed to helping patients with many unmet needs.”

After 16 years on the City of Berkeley Community Health Commission, Adler was recruited to the LifeLong Board by its CEO, Marty Lynch. “It felt that serving on the Board offered the opportunity to improve access to quality health care for low-income residents of Berkeley,” says Adler. “In addition, I felt a special obligation to support those dedicated doctors and nurses, and the institutional culture that supported qualified primary-care providers in the face of a nationwide shortage.”

Adler says LifeLong is proud to welcome and serve everyone, regardless of ability to pay or immigration status. LifeLong provides high-quality care for populations with special needs, including people with disabilities, women experiencing high-risk pregnancies, and seniors. The organization has received recognition nationwide for its creative approach to community health solutions.

Through the years, Adler and Lynch have helped recruit numerous Berkeley citizens, leaders, providers and support staff into the LifeLong community. LifeLong recently started a family practice MD residency training program, filling its first class with six highly qualified new medical school graduates.

“Just being around so many smart people dedicated to a difficult mission is inspiring,” says Adler. “I learn so much at every meeting about our healthcare system, the public safety net, state and local politics, finance, human resources, advocacy, and even fundraising.”

Lynch just retired after 48 years as CEO at LifeLong Medical. Adler continues to serve on the Board of Directors. He says, “It’s a pleasure and privilege to serve on a board with people of such diversity, talent, wisdom, and compassion. The organization’s impact on people most in need of good medical care in our community has been profound, particularly at this moment when we face a once-in-a-century pandemic.”

For more information or to donate, visit lifelongmedical.org; 510.981.4100.