

Sisters of Charity of New York
Sister Dorothy Metz, President



Special Tribute

The United Hospital Fund periodically recognizes the important role of individuals and organizations that have had a significant impact on health care in New York and have earned the respect and admiration of the Fund and the broader health care community. This year the Fund is pleased to pay tribute to the Sisters of Charity of New York, now in their second century of serving needy New Yorkers through a comprehensive network of social services, education, advocacy, and health care institutions.

Times, as well as the specific needs of New York's poor, have changed dramatically since Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the Sisters of Charity in the early 1800s. But through the decades, this dynamic congregation of Catholic women has maintained a remarkable and resolute clarity of purpose—to serve the poor, needy, and oppressed, those on the margins of society, with kindness and compassion. From their early work treating the victims of New York's infectious epidemics, to establishing hospitals that served as community anchors in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, to their current work caring for the homeless, the hungry, immigrants, victims of domestic violence, and more, the Sisters have embraced New York's most vulnerable and created an enduring record of charity in action.

The story of the Sisters of Charity begins with Elizabeth Ann Bayley, born in 1774 into a prominent New York family. Her physician father was the first director of the quarantine station for the Port of New York. When her husband, William Magee Seton, died of tuberculosis—leaving Elizabeth Seton, at age 29, a penniless widow with five children—her world changed dramatically. Soon after, she converted to Catholicism and left her native New York, where family and friends disapproved of her new religion, to move to Maryland. There, in 1809, she founded the American Sisters of Charity.

In 1817, three Sisters of Charity were sent to New York City to staff an orphanage, the beginning of the congregation's two centuries of caring for New Yorkers—and of carrying on the all-embracing vision of Elizabeth Seton, who died in 1821 of tuberculosis. That was the first of a number of orphanages and child care agencies that the Sisters created to meet the needs of a growing population of poor orphans. They also established schools and academies, building the foundation of New York's parochial school system and, in 1847, founding what would later become the College of Mount St. Vincent. Above all, from their earliest days, the Sisters of Charity played a central role in meeting the health care needs of New York's poor.

It was the cholera epidemic of 1849 that impelled the Sisters to open St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan, the first Catholic hospital in New York City. St. Vincent's went on to provide innovative care for all who came through its doors for more than 160 years. One of the first hospitals to open a nursing school certified by the State Board of Regents, and one of the earliest responders to the AIDS epidemic, St. Vincent's also became a major provider of services to the homeless and the mentally ill. It was not the Sisters' only institution to reach out to New Yorkers. Whenever there was a need—whether to treat smallpox, tuberculosis, or other once-rampant infectious diseases, or to care for returning Civil War soldiers—the Sisters responded, over time founding or administering thirteen hospitals throughout the greater New York area.

Today the Sisters of Charity continue to play a critical role in New York's health care and social services, sponsoring important health care facilities and agencies throughout the metropolitan area: St. Joseph's Medical Center in Yonkers, an acute care hospital and nursing home; St. Vincent's Hospital Westchester, providing mental health and addiction recovery services; the New York Foundling, with a range of supportive and preventive services for at-risk children and their families; and the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, offering nursing care and rehabilitation for medically fragile children. The Sisters and their growing network of lay associates also serve as doctors, nurses, therapists, and chaplains at health care facilities throughout the metropolitan area, and provide counseling in parish offices, social service agencies, and other community settings.

Foresight and versatility—the capacity to read the signs of the times—have long been hallmarks of the Sisters of Charity. They are acutely aware of the needs of *today's* poor. Their sponsored work includes an East Harlem emergency housing program for women and children, many of whom are fleeing abuse; an award-winning Bronx-based program that offers meals for the hungry, as well as medical care, counseling, and free legal services; and a Yonkers program that provides poor immigrants with emergency food and clothing as well as child care, English language classes, and job training. The Sisters have long been advocates for the uninsured and for increased access to quality health care for the poor.

On behalf of New York's entire health care community, the United Hospital Fund is proud to honor the Sisters of Charity of New York for 200 years of compassionate service spanning every borough of New York City and beyond. Time and again, the Sisters have demonstrated that their call to love and serve the poor truly knows no limits. Our city is profoundly better because of the Sisters' remarkable contributions, and the proud legacy of Elizabeth Ann Seton that their work embodies.