

Palama Settlement: 100 Years of Serving a Neighborhood's Needs

Paula Rath

The founding of Palama Settlement brought to those who might not be able to afford it public health nurses for maternal care and nutrition, well-baby clinics, tuberculosis clinics, medical and dental clinics, and eventually major support of medical needs during and after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Palama Settlement celebrates its centennial year with many of its early functions assumed by state and private organizations, but it is prepared to enter the next 100 years of service to the community. Palama was founded by James Arthur Rath with the purpose of serving the community; many people today remember their childhood and Palama Settlement.

Settlement Movement—Palama Settlement

A settlement is established to identify and meet the needs of its community. The settlement movement began in England during the 1880s when Samuel Barnett, the vicar of Saint Jude's Parish in London, invited university students to *settle* and share in the life of the people of a deprived area.¹ The aim of the settlement program has remained the same for more than 100 years: to enable social workers, health care providers, and community leaders to gain an understanding of the conditions under which the people in a given geographical neighborhood lived—and to enlist the aid of the more fortunate to improve these conditions. One of the unique factors in the settlement approach to meeting human needs is that the social workers move into the area and live side by side with the people, enabling them to learn firsthand what the needs are.

Today in the United States there are only a handful of settlements still in existence; Honolulu is fortunate to have one of them—Palama Settlement. For 100 years Palama Settlement has served as an outstanding example of how a settlement can serve its community. Its programs are constantly growing and changing with the needs and conditions of the people in Kalihi-Palama. Throughout the years it has served all age groups, crossing lines of race, religion, national origin, and economic status.

Meeting the medical needs of this ever-changing neighborhood has often been a primary focus for Palama Settlement. On the eve of this centennial, it is appropriate to look back at just a few of the medical programs provided at this key community center during its first 100 years.

A Brief Overview

In a 1941 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Philip S. Platt noted in an article titled "Honolulu's Hull House," that Palama Settlement pioneered numerous farsighted and important health programs in Hawaii, including:

- Public health nursing in Hawaii
- Prenatal clinics and child health expositions
- Day camps to teach health, hygiene, and stress management
- Milk stations
- Tuberculosis committees
- Branch dispensaries
- Courses in public health at the University of Hawaii

Platt wrote:

During the 45 years of its existence Palama Settlement has seen Honolulu grow from a sprawling village of 30,000 to a metropolis of 200,000. Untold thousands of citizens scattered through the city and its principal islands have spent their youth under the helpful guidance of Palama.²

Public Health Nursing

James Arthur Rath was a social worker who was born and raised in Hyderabad, India, the son of a British physician who was a civil servant. The YMCA of India sent him to Springfield College in Massachusetts, then a training institute for future YMCA workers. While there, he was recruited by Mr P.C. Jones of the Hawaii Evangelical Association to come to the island of Oahu to form a



Circa 1930, Palama Settlement Public Health nurses working in the community.

settlement from what was then Palama Chapel. At that time, in 1905, Palama Chapel was still a religious organization reaching out to its community. However, Jones and other Chapel board members recognized that the needs of the neighborhood were far greater than what they could provide. So, in keeping with the international settlement movement, Rath and his Massachusetts schoolteacher wife, Ragna Helsher Rath, moved into the Palama neighborhood.

As a trained social worker, Rath quickly completed a survey of Kalihi Palama's needs and established Palama Settlement with the help and support of Central Union Church and many of Honolulu's prominent, socially conscious families such as the Castles, Dillinghams, Lowreys, Baldwins, and Galts. On July 21, 1910, a charter was signed by the Territory to create Palama Settlement as an eleemosynary organization under a volunteer board, with the

executive director (Rath) working under the Board of Directors.

Among the first needs identified by the community survey were health and hygiene. Palama had a serious tuberculosis problem, as well as venereal disease and unacceptable sanitation conditions in the tenements where the majority of Palama people lived. In addition there was a dearth of dental care, prenatal care, and a lack of education regarding health and hygiene.

Therefore, Rath, in 1906, worked with the Free Kindergarten Association of Hawaii (now KCCA, marking its 100th anniversary in 1995) to provide a public health nurse for home nursing among the poor. This was quickly followed by establishment of a milk depot at Palama to dispense free milk to needy infants. In 1908, an executive nurse and several more field nurses were added to the Palama Settlement staff on a full-time basis. By 1910 there were 10 nurses: two doing tuberculosis work and eight making weekly visits to each public school plus continuing their home visits and working at four free dispensaries where they provided first-aid and follow-up treatments. During these early years there were no physicians on the Settlement staff. The dispensaries were tents with wooden floors where nurses provided basic first-aid and a plethora of health education. From 1910, however, physicians generously volunteered their time at the dispensaries, screening and treating patients from many of Oahu's poor neighborhoods.

In 1914, with guidance from Arthur F. Jackson MD and assistance from W. Dunn MD, Palama introduced a "Mother's Rest Camp" at Kaipapau, near Waialua Beach, adjacent to the home of W.D. Baldwin MD. Here, exhausted mothers could come for a week or two of rest while a nurse taught them and their children nutrition, hygiene, laundry, and cooking. It was also in 1914 that Dr Jackson began to see patients in Palama's outpatient clinic three days a week.

One of the most famous names affiliated with Palama Settlement is that of Mabel Smyth, who was Public Health head nurse from 1919 to 1928. A part-Hawaiian woman who grew up in Palama, Smyth's strength, intelligence and abilities were recognized by Rath, who sent her to Boston for special training in public health nursing. While there she learned all the latest public health skills and techniques and brought them back with her to her Palama neighbors.

In 1923, under Smyth's leadership, the nurses at Palama began child health work, first through well-baby clinics, followed by obstetrical clinics. Public health nursing was centered in Palama Settlement for more than 20 years, after which it came under the Board of Health.

Outpatient Clinics Provided as a Gap Measure

Each decade presented a new, unmet need for Palama Settlement. From 1910 to 1923 all of the city's tuberculosis clinics were held there. In 1925, Palama's clinics were available for needy neighborhoods throughout Oahu: Beretania, Kalihi, Kauluwela, Punchbowl, Kakaako, Castle Kindergarten, Moiliili, Waikiki, St Mark's Mission, Iwilei and Palama.

In its Report to the Community in 1929, the Palama Settlement Board, chaired by John R. Galt, reported some remarkable health-related statistics. Among them:

- Palama physicians and nurses cared for 12,000 families (23,744 patients).
- 20 public health nurses cared for and taught mothers and children.
- An average of 50 patients were seen by two volunteer physicians each morning.
- Palama provided specialty clinics in cardiology, dermatology, orthopedics, obstetrics, eye, ear nose and throat, dental care and venereal disease (more than 11,000 outpatient visits for specialty

care).

- 12 weekly baby and preschool conferences were held.
- Preventive dental care for 2,500 first graders was provided.

More than 30 Honolulu physicians volunteered their time and talents to provide this extraordinary measure of care to the people of this deprived neighborhood. A partial list of prominent physicians who provided medical and specialty care during the late 1920s includes: M.A. Cassidy, J.W. Lam, D.B. Bell, E.M. Howarth, R.E. Cloward, J.A. Morgan, N.P. Larsen, H.L. Arnold, F.L. Putman, A.L. Craig, D.L. Withington, R.B. Faus, E. Leong, W.C. Barger, M.H. Mack, I.K. Cummings, C.F. Reppun, J. Kuninobu, G. Straub, and J. Saunders.

In July of 1947, the *Honolulu Advertiser* editorial page praised Palama's role in providing decades of needed medical care to the people of the city and county on the eve of St Francis and Queen's Hospitals opening their own outpatient clinics:

Palama has, over the years, served well the community in a field of activity never intended as its primary function...Palama is to be congratulated for having contributed so abundantly to a program of better medical care for the indigent sick of our county. Well done, Palama!³

Palama Settlement Meets Medical Needs in Time of War

Following the morning of December 7, 1941, Palama Settlement became a center of medical activity for the Honolulu County Medical Society. The society's Emergency Medical Preparedness Committee trained about 100 people, recruited largely from among the Settlement employees. The first civilian casualties were received at the Settlement on that fateful day. Palama was also thrust into 24-hour-a-day action as headquarters for one of three Air Raid Warden Zones, with the Settlement's director designated as the leader for the evacuation plans of the Mayor's Disaster Council.

In this former haven of peace and social activity, the staff now handed out gas masks, conducted fingerprinting, and issued passes. In a continued medical role, they also immunized the neighborhood against typhoid and smallpox. Meanwhile, the Fresh Air Camp and the Palama Gymnasium were leased to the Army.⁴

A Legacy of Caring

During the past 50 years Palama Settlement has grown and changed to meet the needs of the Kalihi-Palama Neighborhood. While many of the tasks taken on in the 20s, 30s, and 40s were subsequently adopted by the city and state organizations or by private or public clinics and hospitals, Palama continues to keep its finger on the pulse of the people. Though many of Palama's programs are currently in the areas of education and recreation, and socialization, the *mauka* Fresh Air Camp at Opaepa is still there for those who need it. The Strong-Carter Dental Clinic, after 75 years of service, closed its doors in March 1995.

One thing seems certain. As long as people live in Kalihi-Palama, Palama Settlement will be there to meet their needs, whatever they may be: medical, social, recreational, or educational. With the continued generous assistance of the medical community, the Settlement can look forward to another 100 years of service.

References

1. Hillman. *Settlements and Community Centers*. November 17, 1966.
2. Platt S. Honolulu's Hull House. *JAMA*. 1941.
3. *Honolulu Advertiser*. July, 1947. Editorial.
4. Platt PS. *Palama Settlement in War Time*. April 15, 1942.