Citizen groups worked with doctors and nurses to find ways to extend medical care to more people.

Public health nurses, often hired by community organizations, provided care and instruction to immigrant and poor families in both urban and rural areas.

The participation of grassroots groups in battles over health care reform continues in the 21st century.

Today's major health care challenges include accessibility and quality of care for military veterans, the disabled, and the elderly.

A nurse from the Henry Street Settlement with a Chinese family in the Bronx, New York, 1930s

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Veteran Mark Howey participates in a public forum on delays in obtaining care at Veterans Health Administration hospitals, Phoenix, AZ, May 9, 2014

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A Public Health Service physician examines an elderly patient in a home setting, ca. late 20th century

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Health care reform has been a contentious political issue in the United States for more than a hundred years. Even after the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, which expanded access to health insurance coverage for millions of people, Americans continue to disagree on whether and how to make quality health care available to all.

From the beginning of the 20th century to today, citizens have made their voices heard in these debates. Health care reform is usually associated with presidents and national leaders, but this exhibition tells the lesser-known story of how movements of ordinary people helped shape the changing American health care system.

Since the 1960s, social movements have defined health rights as essential to ending the second-class status of marginalized groups. Activists demanded health programs and called attention to disparities in medical care. Doctors and medical students in the civil rights movement protested racial discrimination in health care.

Early in the 20th century, rapid industrialization, new waves of immigration, and growing labor unrest made the health of workers and the poor a matter of national concern. The pamphlet that later became Our Bodies, Ourselves inspired women around the country to start self-help groups and feminist health clinics.

Farm workers' organizations opened clinics for migrant agricultural workers and their families. The Urban League, a civil rights organization, co-sponsored this well-baby clinic to combat high infant mortality in African American neighborhoods, Detroit, MI, 1919.