

A Rose Grows in Oakland

On Kaiser Permanente Northern California's 15th Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, employees and physicians volunteered at worksites throughout the Bay Area.

On a bright January morning in East Oakland, Karen Quintal, a project manager in Kaiser Permanente Northern California, wearing work pants and gardening gloves, pulled out a few weeds next to a chain-link fence and shook off the damp earth.

"This is my 13th year of volunteering on MLK Day at Kaiser Permanente," she said as she continued weeding. "I believe that giving back to your community is the perfect way to honor Dr. King."

Quintal joined 50 other Kaiser Permanente Northern California employee volunteers at the [Roses in Concrete Community School](#) to work on a variety of projects — from weeding and replanting annuals in the community garden to painting positive bilingual messages in the bathrooms: "We are powerful," and, "Somos poderosos."

But the work that day was more than just beautifying and revamping the space.

"It's about making these kids feel safe and valued," said Leslye Salinas, one of the founding members of the school. "This building used to be offices, and this work will help the space feel more like a school. This has been a longtime dream of ours."

A 'Day On'

Across Northern California on Jan. 21, more than 1,500 Kaiser Permanente employees volunteered 10,000-plus hours at 23 work sites.

This year marked the organization's 15th Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service — a "day on" in which employees and physicians sign up at [KPCares.org](#) to volunteer at a pre-selected worksite.

This year's theme focused on housing insecurity and mental health and wellness, with volunteer opportunities ranging from helping a shelter with emergency preparedness to creating hygiene kits that will be distributed to those experiencing homelessness in the Bay Area.

"Our goal is always to get as many employees involved as possible," said Curshanda Cusseaux Woods, Northern California Community Relations manager. "Any effort, of any size, can have a great impact."

Venus Ke, Northern California Community and Government Relations representative, said the

projects at the school will touch not only the students and their immediate families, but the local Oakland community, too.

“Once we positively impact one individual, that cycle continues on. This speaks directly to the mission of Martin Luther King, Jr. and allows us to do better for people,” she said.

A Garden and Community Thrive

Nature Makonnen teaches health and nutrition at the school, and also runs the gardening program. He worked alongside the Kaiser Permanente volunteers, pushing wheelbarrows and shoveling dirt.

“[We view food as medicine here](#),” he said. “When we first started the program, one of the children thought that peaches come from cans. I said, ‘We have to change that thinking. We need to show the children where their food comes from.’”

Now the school’s garden has trees such as peach, apple, and plum; vegetables such as broccoli, chard, and kale; and herbs such as rosemary, peppermint, and sage. And the school welcomes the students’ family members to take the food from the garden, free of charge.

“The volunteers are making a big difference, and helping to sustain our work here,” Makonnen continued.

Parent Monica Guerrero, who volunteered with her 2 daughters alongside Kaiser Permanente employees, agreed.

“The students are going to come in tomorrow and be so excited that Kaiser Permanente came out to support us.”

To learn more about how to get involved in MLK Day and other volunteer projects at Kaiser Permanente, please visit [KPcares.org](https://kpcares.org).