

Loudoun Free Clinic Balances on Healthcare's Front Lines

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"The Loudoun Free Clinic was very helpful and generous to me. I can honestly say they helped me handle this ordeal/disease very well. Every single person I have met at the Loudoun Free Clinic has been wonderful and has treated me like a family member."

This excerpt from a grateful patient's heartfelt letter to the Loudoun Free Clinic is among scores of others, which are mailed, perhaps shyly handed to a staff member, or sometimes dropped off at the Free Clinic's offices on Cornwall Street in downtown Leesburg.

"We are definitely on the front lines of health care," says Brenda Beamer, whose job as the Free Clinic's Clinical Director keeps her busy at the day and evening sessions held at the clinic's headquarters at Inova Loudoun Hospital's Cornwall campus. Beamer, several paid staff members, and a large cadre of community volunteers, ranging from interested individuals to healthcare professionals, are the manpower that keeps the Clinic's doors open to serve low-income and uninsured Loudoun residents. They are also the caring individuals who first detect the potential of serious illness in patients who realized they had a problem but didn't seek medical attention because they didn't have insurance or the money to pay for treatment.

Brenda Beamer, Clinical Coordinator of the Loudoun Free Clinic, and volunteer physician Robert Saunders consult a chart. (Photo by Gary Dickens, Leesburg Magazine)

As part of the board's effort to keep the doors open, Sharon Meyers is again chairing the clinic's annual fundraiser, a popular casino-themed evening with a silent auction. Last year Meyers and her volunteer committee raised more than \$100,000 for the Free Clinic, and she hopes this year's event, which is scheduled for November 12 at the National Conference Center, will bring in even more.

Born of necessity and nurtured by the communities they serve, more than 1,200 free clinics now operate across the country, with shoestring budgets, a few paid staffers, and many devoted volunteers. As the National Association of Free Clinics (NAFC) notes, free clinics generally operate "outside of the recognized safety-net system for healthcare," which means they serve people who have no other access to treatment. The phrase "recognized safety-net system," refers to federally funded clinics, which at first glance appear quite similar to free clinics, but federally funded organizations receive federal money and employ providers, whereas free clinics aren't eligible for these funds, so they rely on volunteers, donors, and underwriters.

The need for free clinics is indisputable. According to a study by the American Medical Association last year, some 46 million people across America either delayed treatment or went without it altogether because they couldn't pay for it. The healthcare industry is anxious to keep those people out of emergency rooms and to reduce the onslaught of chronic health problems that come from neglect, so regardless of what happens to the national healthcare reform law, free clinics aren't likely to disappear. They fill an important niche in the healthcare delivery system.

Dr. Diane Helentjaris was the driving force behind The Loudoun Free Clinic's creation. The former director of the Loudoun County Health Department worked with human service organizations to form the Catocin Foundation, the non-profit parent of the Loudoun Free Clinic,

which has been in continuous operation since 2002. Initially the Free Clinic was housed in the health department, but later Inova Loudoun Healthcare donated space at its Leesburg campus and offered financial assistance with operating expenses, making it possible for the clinic to serve more patients.

The well-worn phrase, "it takes a village," comes to mind when observing a typical day or week at the Free Clinic. Currently, 160-plus volunteers, 63 medical professionals, 45 local referral specialists and medical organizations are responsible for the Free Clinic's day-to-day operations. Longtime Leesburg physician John Andrew serves as its volunteer Medical Director, overseeing the care provided to 984 patients in fiscal year 2010, a number that rose by more than 50 percent to 1,540 patients in fiscal year 2011. Clinic staffers attribute the increase to the weak economy, which has brought more first-time patients to the clinic, as well as sicker patients, some with chronic health issues.

Loudoun Free Clinic Medical Director John Andrew (right) and Physician Assistant Doug Brown confer. (Photo by Gary Dickens, Leesburg Magazine.)

Local residents, businesses, churches, clubs, groups and organizations help with the clinic's work. Evening clinic sessions make for a long day for its staffers, so area eateries, such as Tuscarora Mill and the Wine Kitchen, deliver complimentary meals to volunteers.

"It's a massive effort that takes willing hands, kind hearts, and loyalty to our mission of making healthcare available to those who otherwise would go without," says Erin Smith, a Leesburg financial advisor, who chairs the Free Clinic's Board of Directors.

The Free Clinic is funded exclusively through contributions, grants, donated goods and services, and its annual November fundraiser. Smith and the other board members are proud of the Clinic's frugality in managing the community's generosity. For every dollar spent at the Free Clinic, \$7.04 is given back in healthcare services to those in need.

"Donations to the Free Clinic and the healthcare services we provide stay local as only Loudoun residents are eligible to receive medical care at the clinic," Smith said. "We are very grateful to so many in our community for their ongoing support of what is a grassroots effort at making a difference in the lives of others."