



(Image: Feeling Fit: Sunday July 26, 2009 The Sun – No cost health clinic offers help for the uninsured. Dr. Eusebio Gonzales is one of the volunteer physicians that see patients at the St. Vincent de Paul Community Healthcare clinic on Gibraltar Street for patients with little or no insurance. Also inside: The Biggest Loser Challenge week four results. Protect your child from injury- Tips from Health Start.)

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## No-cost health clinic offers help for the uninsured

*Evening hours give working poor a place to go*

**By STEPHANIE OBLEY SUN CORRESPONDENT**

The stories bring chills and images of what-if.

A young woman with a year-long cough from cancer she didn't know she had. Another with undiagnosed breast cancer. A patient needing gall bladder surgery. And the many people who lived day to day without realizing they had diabetes and without treating it.

"They saved my life," said 57-year-old Port Charlotte resident Barbara Thomas.

All of these people found care at the Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Health Clinic at 21450 Gibraltar Drive in Port Charlotte. The clinic, run by the St. Vincent de Paul Community Health Care Inc., opened February 2008 and offers free health care — including dental and vision — to adult Charlotte County residents with no insurance and whose annual income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Federal poverty guidelines are based on family size and range from \$21,660 for a single person up to \$74,020 for a family of eight.

According to the clinic's Executive Director Suzanne Roberts, there are about 30,000 uninsured residents in the county.

The 3500-square-foot modular clinic is open from 5 to 9 p.m. weekdays for both appointments and walk-ins. Free prescription medication is dispensed every Wednesday from 9 to noon.

Since opening, 2,200 patients have gone to the clinic, with 1,700 getting medication at the pharmacy. A satellite pharmacy also operates at the Englewood Health Department.

Thomas, a working single parent who couldn't afford private insurance, had been experiencing headaches and lack of energy. Tests showed she had high blood pressure and diabetes.

"I had no idea," she said. "If they had not been there, I would have let it go. I don't know what would have happened."

Though the clinic is not intended for longterm care and not equipped to handle things like surgery, heart attacks or broken bones, volunteers can connect patients with other resources to get help.

They also work with the three local hospitals and other companies to get lab tests, x-rays, CT scans and MRIs.

The **Charlotte County Health Department** sees patients on a sliding fee scale based on income, but is only open during the day. Those who work but don't have insurance ended up in the ER, said Dr. David Klein, one of the clinic's co-founders and medical directors.

"People are cut off from the medical system, so they don't go to the doctor until they're dying," he said. "They end up using the ER as a walk-in clinic. It's better for the community if everyone is healthy."

Brad Nurkin, CEO for Charlotte Regional Medical Center, agreed.

"ER care is expensive by the nature of it," he said. "When there's nowhere else to go, the ERs have traditionally been the catchmen. We would be impacted dramatically both in costs and crowds without the clinic."

The clinic grew out of St. Vincent de Paul Community Pharmacy, which has operated in this area for the past eight years.

The driving force behind the jump from pharmacy to clinic was two local doctors, Klein and Dr. Mark Asperilla. The two have been involved in other area clinics for people in need, including ones for HIV patients, migrant workers and those left without insurance after Hurricane Charley.

Asperilla, also a medical director for the clinic, said the inspiration came to him early one morning.

"The clinic was founded at two o'clock in the morning," he said. "I couldn't sleep. I drew the plans on a napkin and presented it to the board the next day."

The concern that kept Asperilla awake was the worsening economy and more people being left without insurance after losing their jobs.

“These are tough economic times,” he said. “We see a lot of people who have lost their job. The best option is to have health care before it gets too serious.”

The effect of the economy can also be seen at the health department.

Between October, 2006, and September, 2007, the health department saw less than 11,000 patients. Between October, 2007, and September, 2008, that number jumped to more than 14,000.

“Our numbers are going through the roof,” said Steven Mitnick, the health department’s administrator. “The bottom line is that people are able to receive services somewhere. Both facilities are just busting at the seams.”

The clinic operates on \$344,000 per year and has 150 volunteers, including doctors, nurses and pharmacists. It also has a board of directors, one full-time employee and four parttime employees. Funding comes from several sources, including a million dollar donation from local resident Virginia B. Andes, other individuals and companies, the three local hospitals and the United Way.

The reasons for volunteering vary. For Cheryl O’Donnell, a nurse practitioner and certified diabetes educator, it was a way to give back to the community. The first person she saw was a young woman with five children.

“She was a type 1 diabetic and it was totally out of control,” she said. “We got her sorted out. Those are the kind you feel good about.”

Lori Cohen, who is now the part-time office manager for the clinic, started volunteering when the clinic first opened. She was in between jobs in commercial real estate. “I didn’t have a purpose in life at that time and volunteering gave me a purpose,” she said. “In talking to our volunteers, everyone has a story and a reason for being here. And it’s a special reason.”

Klein said the clinic is always in need of donations to keep running, as well as more volunteers, both from the medical field and non-medical. To make a donation or to schedule an appointment, call 941-766-9570.