

Free Care Clinic Marks Second Year

BY SARA LINDAU: Staff Writer

Moore County Free Care Clinic marked its second anniversary Saturday and finds that the need for its services continues to grow.

In its first two years of operation, the clinic has registered more than 1,000 patients and recorded more than 3,000 patient visits, both initial screening and follow-up care.

Sixty-five percent of the patients are women, and 35 percent are men. Caucasian patients represent 49 percent, while 30 percent are black and 19 percent are Hispanic.

About half of the clinic's patients are employed but do not have access to employer health-care benefits, public assistance programs such as Medicaid or Medicare, or they cannot afford health care insurance because of their low wages, according to Claudia Watson, a clinic volunteer and board member.

The majority of the patients live in Carthage, Robbins, Aberdeen and Southern Pines.

The clinic relies on private donations and a few grants to operate. It does not receive government funds. This year, the clinic has a goal of raising \$442,049. It is about \$40,000 short of that goal, according to Dr. James Tart, a retired cardiologist and member of the clinic's board. He is a volunteer physician at the clinic.

"Our success has created more challenges for us," he said.

The original budget goal for this year was anticipated at \$277,000 for operating expenses. But the demand for its services continues to grow.

One of the goals of the clinic is to provide health care to residents before their medical conditions worsen and require more expensive treatment, as well as prevent illnesses. It is also intended to cut down on the number of people who seek care through a hospital emergency room, which is more expensive.

The clinic first operated two evenings a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 6 to 8 o'clock.

Last year, it added a disease management clinic on weekdays with the help of a \$141,840 grant from Duke Endowment. The clinic hired a full-time physician's assistant to expand services for follow-up care and to enable it to serve more patients. The grant also helped the clinic set up electronic medical records.

The free care clinic was initiated by United Methodist Church members including Dr. David Bruton, a retired Southern Pines pediatrician. It opened April 29, 2004, in the back part of the county Health Department on Pinehurst Avenue in Carthage.

Physicians and other medical workers volunteer their time at the clinic.

Appointments are necessary for the twice-weekly evening clinics on Tuesdays or Thursdays. The first visit includes determining eligibility to receive services. Potential patients are requested to bring pay stubs to verify that their incomes are at or below the poverty level, provide proof that they reside in Moore County (a driver's license, utility bill or county tax form is sufficient) and that they have no health-care insurance, including Medicare or Medicaid, or coverage through an employer.

The clinic processed applications for prescription assistance after determining the type of prescription the applicant required.

"We're just rolling in more patients," said Watson, one of the original founding members. "As there are more visits, more tests, more staffing, more supplies, the costs increase."

The operating budget has ballooned.

FirstHealth of the Carolinas, Pinehurst Surgical and Pinehurst Medical Clinic provide medical volunteers and other support for the clinic.

The clinic has provided about \$2 million in medical care to needy residents. But it has reached about only 25 percent of the county's eligible residents.

It has recruited "an abundance" of volunteers, both medical and lay persons and established specialty clinics for dental, cardiology, back care, pain management, physical therapy and eye care. Some basic lab procedures are done at the clinics.

The clinic refers patients to other doctors' offices, clinics and hospital for more specialized treatment and tests.

The clinic's eligibility criteria are the same as those used by other free clinics in the country, said Laura Tremper-Jones, the executive director.

Under federal government guidelines, a single person is at poverty level if the annual income does not exceed \$9,800 a year. The poverty level for a family is less than \$20,000 a year.

Bruton said the clinic's objective "is to provide our patients with the quality of care as good as you can purchase in our community."

He added that universal health care for Americans is his goal, where "everyone has access to paid-for health and medical care and all are included." He quickly added that he doesn't mean socialized medicine.

Without universal health care, Bruton said, the free care clinics are crucial for the uninsured and sick poor.

To raise money for the clinic, supporters plan a golf tournament.

For more information, contact the Moore Free Care Clinic at 947-6550 or on its Web site at www.moorefreecare.org. Tax-deductible donations may be mailed to Moore Free Care Clinic, PO Box 161, Pinehurst, NC 28370.

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