

SUNDAY SPECIAL

Free Clinic Fills Void For County's Uninsured



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BY SARA LINDAU: Staff Writer

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An endless stream of poor, uninsured sick people just keep coming and coming to the Moore Free Clinic.

The Free Clinic opened April 29, 2004, operating out of the Moore County Health Department building in Carthage. It is the brainchild of Southern Pines United Methodist Church and one of its members, Dr. David Bruton of Southern Pines.

Bruton is a former Southern Pines pediatrician and former secretary of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

Discussions began about two years ago on how to meet the needs of the increasing number of people who lack health insurance and access to basic health care.

The clinic operates two nights a week at the Health Department. Volunteer doctors and other medical professionals have treated 522 patients, totaling 1,060 visits since the clinic opened. The clinic relies on volunteers, donations and a few grants to operate.

"The estimated value to our community from the Free Clinic is \$2 million in the first year of operation," Bruton said. "Our goal is to provide the highest quality medical care available in this community."

It is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization overseen by a Board of Directors that includes Bruton and the Rev. Mark Wethington, pastor of Southern Pines United Methodist Church.

The clinic is only for Moore County residents between the ages of 18 and 64 who are not covered by Medicare, Medicaid or employer or private insurance, and whose

income is at or below the federal poverty level of \$9,570 gross yearly income for one person.

Some of the people the clinic sees have jobs, both full and part time. In some cases, their employers — often smaller companies — don't provide health insurance. Many of the people can't afford to pay the increasing high premiums for health insurance. Other people are unemployed.

North Carolina has been hard hit in recent years as workers in traditional industries such as textiles, furniture and tobacco have lost their jobs — along with their health insurance — by the thousands to cheaper foreign competition. Moore County has not been immune to exodus of manufacturing jobs, which traditionally offer better wages and fringe benefits than the lower-paying service industry jobs.

Compounding the problem for many of these people is the fact that health insurance premiums have continued to rise, putting coverage out of reach.

That has forced more and more to seek medical care through hospital emergency rooms. By that point, the medical problems tend to be more severe and the treatment is more costly.

Most lack any kind of preventative care from a primary care physician to treat some of these medical problems before they become more serious.

That is where the Moore Free Clinic comes in.

Seventy-three percent of its patients are either working poor or have recently lost their jobs along with their health insurance. This gives them access to health care.

Free Prescription Drugs

One of the mainstays and most valuable aspects of the clinic is the free prescription drug program for patients who come in with common conditions such as asthma, high blood pressure or diabetes. That has literally been a lifesaver for some.

A 38-year-old woman from Eagle Springs, who visited the clinic to pick up a prescription for high blood pressure, said she works part-time as a substitute teacher but lacks health insurance. The woman, who requested anonymity, said she does not make enough money to pay for health insurance and still put food on the table and gas in the car.

"The school might call me at 7:30 a.m. and ask me to come substitute and be at the school at 8," she said.

She said it can be stressful, which makes her medicine even more important, but at least she's working.

Cynthia Ingram, 56, of Pine-hurst, has diabetes. She said she had gone to the emergency room at FirstHealth Moore Regional in the past.

Ingram said she was kept overnight once for having high blood sugar. But she hasn't had another episode since a friend told her about the Free Clinic where she now can get her diabetes medicine.

Ingram, who is unemployed, lives with relatives. Her aunt drives her to the clinic. She is looking for a job.

"I used to get tired," she said. "I stayed sleepy and was tired all the time, and I was thirsty when my sugar wasn't under control."

A 40-year-old woman who lost her job as a machine operator suffers from a serious heart condition. She comes to the Free Clinic to get her heart medication.

Donna Collins of Carthage wound up in the hospital emergency room on more than one occasion when she'd get heart palpitations at work in Sanford. Sometimes she would have seizures because the incidents would interrupt the blood flow to her brain, she said.

She lost her job because she missed too much work, in part because of transportation problems.

Her problems worsened in 2003 after she was injured in an automobile accident that required surgery on her back and leg. Like many, she's struggling with previous hospital bills.

"I want to get to the bottom of what my heart condition is," she said.

A beta blocker medication seems to be helping her.

"I went to several doctors trying to find out the problem," she said. "I have found out my valves aren't working properly. Health care is so expensive I couldn't afford to keep going back. I just take it day by day."

She hasn't had to return to the emergency room lately.

Raising Enough Money

Bruton and T.J. Tremper-Jones, a nurse who is the full-time executive director of the clinic, said recently that the only complaints they hear are mostly from uninsured people who need help but have incomes slightly above the federal poverty level. They are not eligible.

Moore County Health Director Robert Wittmann and the Moore County Board of Commissioners have allowed the Free Clinic to pay \$1 rental to use the Health Department.

The clinic's annual budget is \$250,000. Most of that goes for buying medical supplies and materials and for the free prescription program. There are two full-time employees. In addition to Tremper-Jones, there is a secretary.

The clinic and its Board of Directors are trying to raise enough money to keep the clinic operating for another year. So far, the board has raised more than \$207,000.

Although the board expects to meet its goal, it needs more funds to expand the clinic's ability to treat the people who continue to come to the clinic.

Bruton and Tremper-Jones estimate that almost 5,000 people in Moore County probably are eligible. The Hispanic community accounts for about half of that, according to Tremper-Jones.

"We haven't been able to serve the Spanish-speaking population as we'd like," Bruton said.

Many Hispanics don't routinely seek any medical care. Another deterrent seems to stem from ingrained fear of authorities, they said.

Jones and several volunteers speak Spanish.

The percentage of uninsured adults under 65 has increased from 17 percent to 19.4 percent of the population in North Carolina, while employer-based coverage has declined from 64.2 percent a few years ago to 55.7 percent last year.

More and more of North Carolina's working age men and women are losing their insurance at a faster pace than the rest of the country, according to Bruton.

Bruton emphasized no tax money supports the clinic. Those who need it have nowhere else to get basic treatment to prevent their conditions from worsening, even becoming life-threatening, which lands them in a hospital emergency room.

The clinic has a goal of reducing the number of people using emergency rooms as a doctor's office, he said. Since the emergency room at Moore Regional now refers people to the Free Clinic, it's "a wash," Tremper-Jones said.

If enough grant funds come through, the clinic can employ a full-time physician's assistant or nurse practitioner to help with continuing care and counseling for patients.

The county Health Department could even share some of the services of the additional medical professional, he said.

That would also relieve Tremper-Jones of some of her nursing duties and allow her to become more of a full-time director to handle the administrative responsibilities.

With a second medical professional on staff, the clinic could operate for more than two nights a week to see more patients. Appointment slots for new patients are filled six weeks in advance.

Bruton and others are speaking to groups all over Moore County to tell the Clinic's story and to raise money.

Grants have helped, but they are not permanent, he said. The grants help get a program started but are one-time sources of funding. In the long run, private donations from the community is the best way to guarantee that the clinic will remain in operation, he said.

Bruton, a self-described optimist, said "I'm not inclined to worry, but if I were inclined to worry, it would be about continuing to be able to fund the clinic year after year."

Continued support from the medical community is also critical.

Last spring, Bruton and one other retired physician volunteered at the clinic. Now there are 33 physicians, physician assistants and nurse practitioners volunteering their after-hours time on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Other volunteers include a social worker with the Moore County Department of Social Services who helps determine eligibility of patients.

In addition, 24 medical specialists have agreed to see patients referred by the Free Clinic.

Since the clinic opened, it has referred patients to specialists in surgical, gynecological, orthopedic, pain, podiatry (foot), gastroenterology, cardiology, Sandhills Mental Health and dermatology at their offices.

Some specialists occasionally conduct clinics "in house" if enough patients require their expertise, Bruton said. These include physical therapists, eye doctors (for diabetes screenings), back specialist, dermatologist and cardiologist.

Dental Care

The clinic expanded into dental care last year. Dental care is offered once a month at the Pinehurst offices of Drs. Clement and Kameron Monroe, a husband-and-wife practice. Volunteer dentists extract bad teeth from people referred by the Free Clinic.

The Monroes have recruited other dental professionals to volunteer, Clement Monroe said.

They began offering the volunteer service after reading an article in The Pilot about a man who tried to kill the excruciating pain from bad teeth by putting pulverized Goody's Headache Powder on the rotten tooth so he could sleep.

Although the Dental School at the University of North Carolina provides dental care from students at a reduced rate to the public, many people eligible for the Free Clinic couldn't get transportation to Chapel Hill. FirstHealth of the Carolinas operates three dental clinics to serve poor children. But there was really no options for working poor and unemployed adults.

Last Monday, Franklin D. Townsend of Robbins was getting a tooth pulled during the dental clinic. Townsend, who turns 59 today, has been unemployed for three years

since Sunkist let him go as a truck driver. Townsend lost his driver's license after suffering a seizure that was probably caused by an undiagnosed diabetic condition.

He had last visited a dentist several years ago. Since then, Townsend tried to get disability but has been turned down. His 63-year-old wife, Marjorie, who gets hypertension medication from the Free Clinic herself, has to support them both on her pay as a caretaker for an invalid in Carthage.

On Monday, he was complaining of toothache that woke him up at night. He had lost a filling a couple of years ago, but he couldn't afford to go to the dentist.

"I don't know what we would have done without the help from the Free Clinic," Townsend said as he waited for the numbing medication to kick in so Monroe could pull the tooth.

Townsend already visited the Free Clinic to get help with prescriptions for high blood pressure and high cholesterol. He then began to experience thirst and blurry vision that brought him back. Now he gets medicine for diabetes from the clinic.

"I've worked for 37 years, practically all my life," Townsend added.

His wife can't retire because the Social Security payment and even a part-time job allowed by the regulations wouldn't be enough to sustain them both without her husband's getting disability. He isn't old enough to be eligible for early Social Security benefits.

"The people who come to the dental clinic appear to be earnest folks," Monroe said. "People need the basic care that we are exclusively able to provide as dentists. Ethically, I feel obligated to take care of some people who simply can't afford to pay for what I do."

"The scope of the dental clinic is about relieving pain and removing infection from people's mouths. We do the basic dental care to keep the patient's immune system up.

Sometimes a patient's condition is so bad that antibiotics must be prescribed in Carthage to treat the infection before the extraction can be done without danger of bacteria being released to the bloodstream.

He added, "We couldn't do this clinic without the volunteer help from our assistants."