

Moore Free Care Clinic Has More Than 2,000 Visits in 2006

David Evans
Staff Writer

Moore Co. - Through the dedication of volunteers, what started as one nurse and a small budget four years ago has grown into a viable source of medical treatment and medicine for the people of Moore County who need it the most.

Last year, the Moore Free Care Clinic saw 624 patients during more than 2,000 visits. Each one of those patients received free quality care provided by professionals who donated time, money, or both to see to these people living below the poverty level and who, for the most part, suffer from chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood-pressure.

"The vast majority of our patients are very grateful to receive this care," said Executive Director Laura Tremper-Jones, RNC, MSN. "Otherwise, they are stuck. They don't have the money for treatment or medicine. Some are working for minimum wage or part-time jobs and still trying to make ends meet."

Tremper-Jones has been with the clinic from the beginning. She knows how hard it is on her patients to get the care they need to survive.

"This is a huge weight off them," she added. "Even if they are offered medical insurance, many can't afford to take it. The ones working part-time usually aren't even eligible. Many work and pay for health insurance to be

available to their children but not for the adults."

"People don't realize how expensive medicine can be until they pay for it the first time," said Tremper-Jones. "Some of these medicines can cost \$250 a month and when they see that price tag they can't believe it really costs that much."

Last year, the clinic gave out \$124,351 in free medication provided by pharmaceutical companies. In addition, they used money provided by generous donations from fund raising efforts within the county to buy another \$79,366.22 in medication. When neither of these outlets for medications would work, Tremper-Jones and her staff scrounged doctor's offices for free medicine samples amounting to \$15,926.19.

Currently, the free clinic sees patients between the ages of 19 and 64 and who meet strict guidelines for income levels, said Tremper-Jones.

"We're really running out of space because we're growing so fast," she said. "We try to see as many patients as we can but it gets kind of hard because of space limitations. The Health Department graciously allows us to use their exam rooms and that helps a lot."

Tremper-Jones and the rest of the five person paid staff work very hard to give their patients a chance to lead a life without the fear and pain of untreated chronic illness. In addition to the full-time staff, approximately 25 doctors have spent time

working the clinic, as well as over 40 nurses.

"We have our regular primary care, eye cars and nose specialists, orthopedic specialists, as well as many other specialists in the community who see patients at their own clinics because of the need to have their own specialized equipment," said Tremper-Jones. "We even have physical therapy and a quarterly eye clinic for our diabetics. We also have a teeth-pulling clinic for people who have infected teeth."

Despite their valiant efforts, the need for free care continues to increase, said Tremper-Jones. To make it all work, the clinic staff has become real experts at determining eligibility.

"Now we require each prospective patient to first come in for an eligibility appointment," said Tremper-Jones. "We have to prove to the pharmaceutical companies that these people will meet their eligibility criteria. Before we did this, patients weren't providing all the necessary paperwork to prove their need. We found we were paying for medications with donation money when those same patients were actually eligible for free medication from the drug companies."

She added that many of the companies don't publish their eligibility requirements. It is up to the clinic to prove the patient's eligibility under blind conditions to unknown requirements.

"It can be a challenge," she said with a chuckle.

"I'm proud to say that despite the challenge North Carolina has more free clinics than nearly anywhere in the United States. We have over free clinics operate across the state."

"We've developed some really strong associations," she added. "We work together now to develop new ways to take care of people in need."

For all her hard work and that of her staff, Tremper-Jones says she couldn't do what she does without the volunteers; the donations that come from the local fund-raising "Dining in the Pines"; other private citizens.

"We raised \$57,000 last year and it just our second time holding it," she said. "The Pinewild ladies and others from across the county, who hold the events for us, really work hard well. We also have local and communication professionals who provide invaluable skills."

Monies are also provided through the D. Endowment, the Kate Reynolds Foundation, Nursing, First Health the Carolinas, church and even local doctors who donate money when they can't donate time to the clinic.

"We really couldn't do all that we do with them," said Tremper-Jones. "We wouldn't be where we are otherwise. The community embraced us and we have grown really fast. We rely on the retired community here in Moore County. Many are retired professionals bring their skills to the table to help our patients."

Personally, Tremper-Jones says she can't think of a better way to spend her medical career.

"This is great," she said. "This is what I became a nurse for in the first place. I couldn't ask for a better job. I bet most of our volunteer doctors and nurses feel the same way well."

The Post
2/6/2007 A-14