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St. Mary's Health Clinics Provide Free Care to Low-Income Twin Cities Residents With Help From Volunteer Doctors and Nurses

A little-known network of free clinics –founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province – is celebrating its 16th year of providing medical care for thousands of low-income and uninsured Minnesotans.

The St. Mary's Health Clinics offer free check-ups and appointments in churches and schools throughout the Twin Cities metropolitan area, using volunteer doctors and nurses. The primary care is supplemented by other medical specialists -- like surgeons, eye doctors and radiologists -- who donate their time and expertise to help patients like Josefina Galiviz of St. Paul.

Galiviz has diabetes and needs regular medical care, but faced a health care nightmare when her husband became disabled and they lost his employer-paid family health insurance. They couldn't afford the \$700 per month for health care coverage for Josefina, and the income from his disability checks and her part-time job as a baby sitter meant they didn't qualify for state-paid health insurance.

But someone at Our Lady of Guadalupe church told Josefina about St. Mary's Health Clinics; she quickly applied and now receives free regular check-ups at a St. Mary's location near her home on St. Paul's West Side.

She also goes to St. Joseph's Hospital for lab tests every three months, and a couple times has needed x-rays -- for a sore foot and spine problems – which were examined, at no cost, by radiologists from St. Paul Radiology.

"This has been such a good place for me; I feel so comfortable here," said Josefina.

A Health Care Tradition

St. Mary's Health Clinics were started in 1992 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who have been providing health care in Minnesota for more than 150 years. The nuns founded Minnesota's first hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital in 1853. Other St. Joseph health care projects over the years have included St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis and Holy Family Hospital in New Richmond, Wisc. (The sisters also founded the College of St. Catherine and and Derham Hall High School, which merged in 1987 with Cretin and is now Cretin-Derham Hall High School.)

When the nuns sold St. Mary's Hospital in 1992, there was a strong desire to continue the order's historic tradition of health care service, particularly for the disadvantaged, said Barbara Dickie, executive director of St. Mary's Health Clinics.

The plan: use volunteer doctors and nurses to provide free medical care in existing community buildings – mainly churches and schools – for low-income, uninsured and under-insured people.

"We wanted to maintain our tradition of health care and social service, but rather than investing in bricks and mortar, we engaged the community to provide places for free care," Dickie said.

At the time, they thought it would be a temporary fix: surely universal health care would soon be implemented and there would be no further need for free clinics.



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That was 16 years ago and the need still exists.

They started with two clinics and now have nine. In addition, a partnership with Park Nicollet Health Services now allows St. Mary's patients to be seen, at no cost, at nine Park Nicollet clinics.

Last year, St. Mary's Health Clinics provided 5,320 primary care visits at the nine community clinics and 7,142 "patient encounters" at Park Nicollet facilities. In addition, 7,246 prescriptions were filled, 703 patients were referred to hospitals and 1,131 patients were seen by specialists.

Types of Care

Dickie said most clients are the working poor, often those working two or three part-time jobs with no health insurance. Most are 30 to 55 years old; there are some children but not many senior citizens. Many are Latino.

Clients call ahead for appointments and are screened for eligibility. Trained workers often find that callers are eligible for Minnesota Care or other medical assistance programs, and can help them with the paperwork and enrollment procedures.

About one-third of the doctor visits involve preventative care, like physical exams and pre-natal visits. Another one-third is for chronic conditions, like diabetes or asthma. And about one-third of the appointments are for colds, flu, rashes, infections and other such problems.

Emergency medical situations such as chest pains or broken bones, are directed to hospitals.

"We are finding that the patients we see are sicker and sicker every year," Dickie said. "Often they've put off health care in the past because they thought they couldn't afford it. And conditions just keep getting worse and worse."

Church Basements?

Talk about clinics in church and schools conjures up a images of linoleum floors and low ceilings, or exposed pipes in a basement near the boiler room. But the St. Mary's Health Clinics locations are clean and well-lit, inviting and comfortable.

The clinic in the west side of St. Paul, where Josefina Galiviz is seen each month, is held every Wednesday afternoon in a meeting room of the St. Matthew's Parish Center. As you enter, signs in English and Spanish point the way along a corridor, past a water fountain and into a large, airy conference room. An AA group meets there one night a week, too, and the church uses it for other meetings and events.

A large crucifix hangs on the wall and the windows look out onto the school playground.

Patients check in and wait in the large room; smaller offices are used for exams and drawing blood.

The doctor or nurse practitioner on duty sees 12 patients each afternoon; appointments are generally 20 minutes each. If necessary, referrals are made for further lab work or x-rays, usually at a nearby hospital.

Ann Fox, a nurse on duty recently at the clinic, said Wednesday – her day to volunteer there – "is the best day of my week."

Other Doctors Contribute

Josefina Galiviz was referred recently to St. Joseph's Hospital in downtown St. Paul for a closer look at her foot problem. There, Dr. Robert Weinmann, of St. Paul Radiology, examined the x-rays and passed along the results to her clinic doctor. Josefina reports that the foot has healed just fine.

"Pro bono work like this is one way we can give back to the community," Weinmann said.

In this case, Weinmann said he didn't necessarily even know that Josefina had been referred from the free clinic. He read the films and made his report. Determining that no payment was required, as part of the arrangement with St. Mary's Health Clinics, was handled later by the office staff.

Josefina reports that the foot has healed well.

"Many people still fall through the cracks in medical care," said Dr. Joseph Tashjian, president of St. Paul Radiology. The practice, with nearly 100 radiologists and imaging physicians, has been donating services to St. Mary's Health Clinics since its early years.

"For the most part, government programs work well in providing health care to those who need it, but there are still people who don't qualify for government subsidies and other in-between cases where people still need medical help.

"And as physicians, it's our responsibility to be sure that when someone needs help, they get it," Tashjian said.

According to Dickie, over the past eight years St. Paul Radiology has handled 823 cases for St. Mary's, and written off the cost of \$109,000.

The radiology practice is one of many specialist groups – surgeons, ophthalmologists, obstetricians and gynecologists, oncologists, and others – which contract with St. Mary's for office visits at no charge, she said.

Grateful and Giving Back

So satisfied with her medical care at St. Mary's, and anxious to help others, Josefina Galiviz has started returning weekly to the clinic at St. Matthew's Parish to work as an interpreter. Many of the patients there speak only Spanish, and Josefina, who moved to Minnesota from Mexico in 1978, is bilingual.

"Some of the doctors and nurses speak Spanish pretty well, but if they're not sure what the patient is saying, the call me in to interpret," she said.

The individuals and families she sees coming through the clinic are uniformly grateful for the assistance, she said. "They all say: 'This is the best,' " she said.

"It feels nice for me to be able to help out in the clinic; they've helped me so much, now I can help, too."

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