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Baron Hill visits volunteer clinic

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While U.S. Rep. Baron Hill was receiving a tour of the Volunteers in Medicine's new clinic Tuesday afternoon, he pressed the flesh with dozens of staff and volunteers. One of the people he met briefly in the hallway was a diminutive, soft-spoken man who thanked him profusely for his visit before unceremoniously moving on.

Ten minutes later — while in the clinic's conference room talking with a dozen of VIM's staff, volunteers and board members — Hill said that a similar clinic in Seymour, one he helped get off the ground five years ago, was fueled by the passion of a single man.

"His name is Dr. Bob," Hill said. "We call him our angel."

Then Hill said, "I've heard this clinic also has an angel. Who is he?"

Those in the room promptly informed Hill that the quiet man he'd met in the hallway — Dr. Rajih Haddawi — was indeed that angel.

Though Haddawi was the driving force behind the creation of the clinic, it's been supremely supported by Cook, which kick-started the project with a \$600,000 gift and is providing the clinic with its new digs at virtually no cost.

Hill also learned that the VIM clinic, which during its first year of operation provided services to more than 4,000 patients and dispensed more than 30,000 prescriptions, is able to operate because of more than 600 lay and professional volunteers.

"I find it incredible that you have so many volunteers," Hill said. "This place speaks volumes about Bloomington. When you see something like this, it tells you this community has a heart."

The clinic, which opened in April 2007 on East Miller Drive, is now at 811 W. Second St.

The new facility, which is being leased from Cook Medical for \$1 a year, provides free medical and mental health care to low-income, uninsured residents of Monroe and Owen counties.

During Hill's tour, which was led by the clinic's executive director, Elizabeth Sturgeon, Hill asked if the clinic has resulted in fewer Bloomington Hospital emergency room visits.

Sturgeon said during first 12 months of operation, Bloomington Hospital's emergency department saw

7 percent fewer patients coming in with minor illnesses.

She added that local specialists, such as heart surgeons, have agreed to operate on VIM patients who need surgery by charging 20 percent of what Medicaid would pay them, up to a \$100 cap.

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