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Clinic to offer free health care

Volunteers in Medicine to open clinic for low-income residents July 2007

by Dann Denny
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By July 2007, a new health-care clinic is scheduled to open in Bloomington, one that will provide free medical services to low-income residents of Monroe and Owen counties who do not have health insurance.

Staffed almost entirely by volunteer doctors, nurses and support personnel, the clinic, called the Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County clinic, will be in the space now housing Bloomington Hospital's Community Health Access Program (CHAP) at 333 E. Miller Drive.

It will replace the CHAP clinic, which offers low-cost health care to residents who don't have insurance or qualify for Medicare or Medicaid.

The new clinic will provide free primary and preventative care for chronic illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure and for acute illnesses such as headaches, fevers and sore throats.

It also will offer free immunizations, health education on such things as weight reduction and smoking cessation, psychological counseling, diagnostic lab and radiology testing at Bloomington Hospital, dental care at the offices of participating dentists, and pediatric care at Southern Indiana Pediatrics.

Dr. Eric Bannec, a Bloomington internist and the new clinic's volunteer medical director, said he expects to open the clinic with a rotation of 40 volunteer doctors offering a four-hour shift each per week.

Dentists will be volunteering, too, Bannec said, adding that many uninsured individuals don't see a dentist until they develop major - and costly - dental problems.

"We have about 10 local dentists so far who will see one or two patients a week," he said. "We expect to get more dentists in the near future."

Clients will be able to obtain medications for acute and chronic illnesses for just \$3 per medication.

"There are nearly 21,000 people without any health insurance in Monroe and Owen counties," said Dr. Rajih Haddawi, a retired orthopedic hand surgeon and chairman of the nine-member board that

will oversee the clinic. "Many of them don't get regular medical care until they develop serious problems, and then they visit the emergency room for costly medical procedures."

Haddawi said Bloomington Hospital's CHAP clinic has done an outstanding job providing low-cost health care to patients unable to pay for services.

"But the ability of uninsured individuals to get affordable healthcare has reached a critical level, both nationally and here in Indiana," he said. "This is a local problem too large for any one institution to bear on its own."

Bloomington Hospital will donate its CHAP facility to the new clinic, provide various in-kind diagnostic services, free hospitalization if necessary - and provide some of its paid CHAP staff to help run the clinic.

Mark Moore, president and CEO of Bloomington Hospital, said the new clinic is a shining example of a community coming together to solve a problem at the local level.

"The CHAP clinic has always been hospital-based in terms of ownership, financing and operation," he said. "It's made a significant contribution to the welfare of the community, but having a community-based clinic embraced by the community and fed by volunteers will enable us to help a considerably larger number of patients."

The CHAP clinic handles 3,500 to 4,000 patient visits a year.

The board expects the new clinic, which will be open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday and Thursday, to handle 14,200 patient visits during its first year of operation.

"We are going to ask our lay volunteers to help us with our outreach efforts to people who can use the clinic's services," Haddawi said. "We are going to knock on people's doors and let them know about everything that will be offered there."

Moore said Bloomington Hospital is "excited to evolve the reach of the current CHAP clinic into a broader model through the Volunteers in Medicine clinic collaboration," adding that the new clinic will be "an exciting addition to the healthcare of our community."

Fueled by volunteers

The clinic will have a paid staff of six to eight people, but will rely primarily on an army of volunteer laypersons and volunteer medical professionals - retired and active physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, nurse practitioners, social workers, psychologists and patient educators.

Lay volunteers will be needed to help answer phones, enter data into computers, remind patients of appointments, escort patients to exam rooms and help patients fill out medical forms for medications.

"We'd like to see 100 to 200 lay volunteers," Haddawi said.

Those wishing to volunteer should e-mail info@VIMMonroeCounty.org or mail the CHAP clinic at

333 E. Miller Drive, Bloomington, IN 47401.

Haddawi said nearly 100 medical professionals have indicated their willingness to volunteer at the clinic, probably in four-hour shifts.

National program model

The new clinic will be modeled after the Volunteers in Medicine national program, which has a history of success in other communities across the country.

The first Volunteers in Medicine clinic, established in 1993 in Hilton Head, S.C. by a group of retired medical professionals, now provides care for more than 20,000 patients a year.

Today, there are 50 other Volunteers in Medicine clinics in the U.S., including facilities in Columbus and Indianapolis.

The Columbus clinic, which has been operating for the past 10 years, now handles 10,000 to 11,000 patient visits a year.

Who is eligible?

Those eligible for the new clinic must live in Monroe or Owen counties, have no health insurance, and have an income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Based on 2006 federal poverty guidelines, a single person could make no more than \$19,600 a year. A family of four could make no more than \$40,000.

"There is a tremendous need for this clinic," Haddawi said. "There are 16,000 adults living within the scope of the new clinic who are uninsured and living at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level."

Haddawi said at least 99 percent of patients currently qualifying for the CHAP clinic will also qualify for free care at the new clinic.

Events today

OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: At 10 a.m. today in Room 1B of the Monroe County Public Library, there will be a press conference announcing the establishment of Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County, which plans to open a health clinic in July 2007.

HEALTH-CARE FORUM: The public is invited to a town hall meeting on health care at 6:30 tonight in the Monroe County Public Library auditorium. Several panelists will speak and answer questions about health-care concerns.

By the numbers

- Nearly nine of 10 people who explored obtaining coverage through the individual insurance market

failed because of affordability or being turned down.

- More than half of adults with coverage through the individual market have annual premium costs of \$3,000 or more, compared with 20 percent of those covered by employer plans.
- 43 percent of adults covered through the individual market spent more than 10 percent of income on premiums and out-of-pocket medical expenses, compared with 24 percent insured through their employers.
- Families with high-deductible plans having trouble paying bills said they have turned to credit cards and savings accounts.
- 41 percent of those with deductibles of \$1,000 or more rated their coverage as fair or poor, compared with 15 percent enrolled in plans with deductibles of \$500 or less.

The study is based on telephone interviews of 1,878 people age 19 to 64, from August 2005 to January 2006. The margin of error is plus or minus 2 percentage points.

Source: Commonwealth Fund

In brief

A new Bloomington clinic that will provide free medical care to low-income residents of Monroe and Owen counties is scheduled to open in the summer of 2007. Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County replaces Bloomington Hospital's Community Health Access Program at 333 E. Miller Drive. Those interested in volunteering should e-mail [info@VIMMonroe County.org](mailto:info@VIMMonroeCounty.org) or write to the CHAP clinic.



Mareana Piatt participates carefully in a gymnastics class Thursday. Mareana is being treated for a tendon problem in her arm, and recently had a cast removed. Her family has been struggling to pay her medical bills. David Snodgrass | Herald-Times



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