

Volunteers in Medicine still as needed as ever after 10 years



Dental assistant Malylin Palma, left, and dentist Park Firebaugh help a patient at the Volunteers in Medicine clinic in Bloomington. VIM Executive Director Nancy Richman says dental care is the biggest gap in the medical community in terms of free services.

Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

In an ideal world, Volunteers in Medicine would hardly be needed, if at all.

But in the 10 years that the health clinic in Monroe County has offered free services to the uninsured, the need for it has only grown.

In April 2007, Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County officially opened its doors on East Miller Drive, and a couple of years later, it moved to its current location near Indiana University Health Bloomington Hospital on West Second Street.

The clinic serves residents in Monroe and Owen counties, and is one of nearly 100 clinics of its kind across the country. The first free medical clinic staffed primarily by volunteers opened in South Carolina in the early 1990s.

“It’s really wonderful that Volunteers in Medicine is still here after 10 years, because there are still hundreds and hundreds of people, and thousands across the country, who are falling through the cracks of the health care reform system. So it’s really great that free clinics still exist,” said Monroe County VIM Executive Director Nancy Richman. “On the other hand, I think that it’s very sad that after 10 years, in 2017, there’s still a need for safety net clinics because people still don’t have insurance.

“We believe that health care is a fundamental human right, not a privilege based on income, or citizenship status, or even having the wherewithal to navigate a very complicated system.”

With that mission in mind, and through partnerships with IU Health, United Way, city and county government and the community at large, Volunteers in Medicine has been able to increase its offerings. On top of standard medical check-ups, the clinic has partnered with the Shalom Community Center to better serve the area’s homeless population and has increased its multilingual volunteer network so it can provide translators to individuals who don’t speak English.

VIM has also recently expanded its dental services — providing cleanings, X-rays, fillings, extractions, restorations, crowns and root canals. VIM is the only source of free dental care in the region, Richman said.

“The whole dental clinic is something that is a major accomplishment over the past year and into the future,” she said. “Primarily, in the past, we had volunteer dentists that mainly came once a week, and it was just overwhelming. (Dental care) is the biggest gap in the medical community in terms of free services.”

Walk through the halls, and it quickly becomes apparent that VIM wants its patients to feel not only healthy but respected. Top-of-the-line examination rooms are decorated with local artwork on the walls, and there’s an X-ray machine that was given to the clinic in one of the dental rooms.

Just because something is free doesn’t mean it should be second-rate, Richman and the rest of the staff believe.

As the name suggests, VIM is able to serve its client base primarily through the strength of its volunteer network.

Office manager Stephen Chambers said everyone who walks through those doors — staff, volunteers and patients — has to go with the flow.

“Since things change so rapidly around here, we have to be really flexible,” Chambers said, holding up a mini Gumby figurine Richman had handed out as a reminder to be just that.

Nobody knows that better than Debbie Horan, who has volunteered as a receptionist at the clinic for the past five years.

“I can’t see myself not doing anything, in terms of giving back to the community,” Horan said. “I love working with the people that come in. The clients are so appreciative, and clearly express that. We save people’s lives here. It’s hard to not appreciate that.”

Horan said another one of her favorite parts of the job is getting to meet all the IU students who volunteer their time. One of them is Edgar Terriquez, who has been volunteering since January.

Terriquez, an IU junior on a pre-med track, is bilingual and is able to translate for Spanish-speaking clients. With Terriquez there in the clinic, Horan no longer has to translate entire sentences on an app on her smartphone.

“My first day, before I was even told what to do, I was translating for someone. I thought that was pretty cool,” Terriquez said. “Volunteering here definitely lets you experience a little bit of diversity.”

In total, the clinic has 16 volunteers who speak Spanish, and others who speak Russian, Mongolian and Chinese, among other languages. If there’s a language barrier, VIM can likely wrangle up the volunteers to get over the hurdle.

The clinic also features a full pharmacy, which pharmacist Ed Hinds said provides roughly 50 to 75 prescriptions daily.

“We did see (the) number of clients dip down after (the Affordable Care Act), but it seems there’s always this undercurrent that rises up,” Hinds said. “It just amazes me. A lot of people hear about us word-of-mouth. They like coming here because we’re essentially a one-stop shop for patients. When people come here, it’s a different mindset of the people that take care of you. I think people definitely appreciate that.”

Patients have appreciated the kind-hearted model of care since week one. Back in 2007, just days after VIM opened, Ruby Smith visited the clinic hoping to fill a prescription for high blood pressure and to have a doctor look at her broken left knee. Smith worked as a custodian at the time, cleaning medical offices, and didn’t have medical insurance.

“There are so many people like me who have no insurance, who can benefit from a place like this,” she told The Herald-Times in April 2007. “And the people here treat you with dignity.”

To meet the current — and future — demand expected at the clinic, Richman said, the staff have updated the medical recordkeeping system to a cutting-edge, electronic system, which will allow them to better serve their patients.

“I don’t think people realize the holistic nature of what we do, and every day the team goes over and above to get somebody what they need,” Richman said. “It’s really astounding. I’ve never worked with a more amazing group of people.”