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Clinic seeks to get the word out

Many who are eligible are not taking advantage of free health care offered by Volunteers in Medicine

By Dann Denny
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By the end of 2008, the Volunteers in Medicine clinic had enrolled 4,440 individuals to receive care, 52 percent more than the number of enrollees at the end of 2007.

But it's only about a third of the people who could potentially use its services, and clinic officials want more folks to benefit.

It's estimated there are about 12,000 low-income, uninsured residents in Monroe and Owen counties who could qualify for the free health care — including eye, dental and behavioral health care — provided by the clinic.

“I think it's exciting that we've been able to enroll that many people in less than two years,” said Elizabeth Sturgeon, the clinic's executive director. “But we want to reach out to even more.”

Sturgeon said the VIM clinic has recently developed a new outreach plan it will launch this summer that calls for an army of volunteers to visit churches, nonprofit agencies and businesses — talking about the clinic and handing out brochures and clinic applications.

Sturgeon said VIM also plans to use Geographic Information System information, coupled with census data, to target low-income areas in Monroe and Owen counties.

“If our mapping shows a low-income area where there might be a group of people who could use our services, we will make a concerted effort to reach those people by getting brochures and other information into their hands,” she said.

Sturgeon believes there is plenty of room for growth in Owen County, where only 13 percent of VIM's enrollees live.

Sturgeon said VIM's new location at 811 W. Second St., which is better equipped and 1,250 square feet larger than the former East Miller Drive facility, makes it easier to handle a larger volume of patients.

The numbers are certainly growing. In 2008, the average number of clinic visits per day was 83, up from 64 in 2007. In 2008 the clinic saw 2,352 patients at the clinic and had 10,192 appointments,

providing \$538,700 worth of free services.

Most of those patients received care for acute and chronic illnesses — ranging from sore throats and sinus infections to diabetes, heart disease and depression.

But when patients have illnesses or conditions that can't be handled at the clinic, they are referred to local specialists in such fields as cardiology, neurosurgery, dentistry and psychiatry.

The specialists examine the patients for free. If they treat them, they charge 20 percent of what Medicaid allows, up to \$100. If the procedure is done at Bloomington Hospital, the hospital offers all its services at no charge.

In 2008, local specialists handled 1,288 VIM referrals and provided nearly \$1 million worth of free care.

“To have all these specialists providing this amount of free care is really a story in itself,” Sturgeon said.

From 2007 to 2008, the percentage of VIM patients who walked into the clinic with no appointment rose from 13 to 27 percent.

“Our goal was to see that rate get up to at least 25 percent by the end of 2008,” Sturgeon said. “We feel it's really important to be able to accommodate a good percentage of walk-ins, so they can get medical care outside the emergency room.”

Negative operating margin

In 2007 the clinic's operating margin (excess revenue over expenses) was \$748,237. In 2008, the operating margin fell into the red by \$97,917.

Sturgeon said this was largely due to \$286,816 worth of losses in investments suffered as a result of the plunging stock market.

“The negative operating margin is a concern, but it's not forced us to cut any of our services,” she said. “With the market in better shape I hope our investments will do better this year.”

The VIM clinic will continue to rely on free care or other medical services provided by Bloomington Hospital, Southern Indiana Pediatrics, IU School of Optometry, IU School of Speech and Hearing, Bloomington Hospital's Olcott Center, Monroe County Health Department, state of Indiana's Breast and Cervical Cancer Program and Susan G. Komen Foundation.

The clinic is further buoyed by 600 lay and professional volunteers, including 300 volunteer doctors, nurses and EMTs; plus 102 specialists.

The Cook Group, in addition to giving the clinic \$600,000, is allowing VIM to lease its current facility from Cook for \$1 a year.

A look ahead

Besides enrolling more people, Sturgeon said the clinic's goals for the next year include recruiting and training more volunteers, raising more funds for operational expenses, and bolstering its recently established endowment.

The endowment will be filled with money left over from a \$50,000 gift from the City of Bloomington, a \$60,000 grant from the State of Indiana, and a private gift from Susan Thrasher. Those monies are being used to cover new equipment, phones, furniture and remodeling costs at the current facility.

"Another goal we have for this year is to provide more comprehensive patient education," Sturgeon said. "This fall we will start a wellness program for the management of chronic disease."

More information

HOURS

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday — 8 a.m.-5p.m., Monday, Thursday — 8 a.m.- 8p.m.

Walk-in patients accepted each day depending on the availability of health care providers. It's best to call first at 333-4001.

VIM's 2008 ANNUAL REPORT

Available online at www.vimmonroecounty.org.

PRESCRIPTIONS

Since it opened, the clinic has filled 27,190 prescriptions, valued at \$2.5 million. Many of the medications patients receive are obtained through the Patient Assistance Program offered by pharmaceutical companies. Prescriptions are dispensed for a small voluntary fee of \$3 each, up to \$9 per day.



Rob Sircar, a volunteer at Volunteers in Medicine, gathers medicine to fill a prescription Friday in the pharmacy at the clinic on West Second Street in Bloomington. Chris Howell | Herald-Times

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