

BREAKING NEWS



Federal judge blocks Indiana abortion law

Volunteers in Medicine clinic sees increasing numbers

By Dann Denny

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The Volunteers in Medicine clinic is at 811 W. Second St. in Bloomington. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times



"The hospital emergency room is not the place to go for primary care. The most expensive care is that received in the emergency room." Elizabeth Thompson, executive director of the Volunteers in Medicine clinic

The Volunteers in Medicine clinic, having just completed its fourth year, continues to show signs of steady growth, according to its recently released annual report.

The clinic served 3,049 people in 2010, 34 percent more than 2009. It also handled 10,543 visits to its pharmacy and dispensed 25,611 prescriptions, representing 14 and 11 percent increases, respectively, over 2009.

The number of visits from people applying for eligibility to the VIM program went up 5 percent, from 5,961 in 2009 to 6,255 in 2010. Only about 5 percent of applicants are typically denied, usually because their income is too high or because they have insurance.

“More people are accessing our services, and it’s good that we are able to reach out and meet that need,” said Elizabeth Thompson, the clinic’s executive director. “But it’s a bad sign that more people are needing our services. We’re seeing more people who either can’t afford health care benefits or are no longer being offered benefits.”

The VIM clinic at 811 W. Second St., which provides free medical care to low-income, uninsured residents of Monroe and Owen counties, also provided \$833,293 worth of free medical services to clients — 22 percent more than in 2009.

And the percentage of VIM patients who used the walk-in clinic rose from 22 percent in 2009 to 26 percent in 2010.

Thompson said the rise in patient volume at the walk-in clinic — where patients are treated for such complaints as colds, toothaches and the flu — means the hospital emergency room can devote more of its resources to serious health problems.

“The hospital emergency room is not the place to go for primary care,” she said. “The most expensive care is that received in the emergency room.”

The report also shows an area of concern — a 7 percent decrease in total volunteer hours, from 18,259 in 2009 to 16,943 in 2010.

The number of lay volunteer hours actually rose from 11,480 in 2009 to 11,502 in 2010, but the number of clinical volunteer hours fell 20 percent — from 6,779 in 2009 to 5,441 in 2010.

“We had two physicians who retired in 2010, and we lost our clinical rotation of IU School of Nursing students due to scheduling problems,” Thompson said. “That extended the length of time it takes to see a primary care provider from two weeks to five to six weeks.”

She said the loss of clinical volunteers is the main reason why the VIM clinic handled 3 percent fewer medical visits in 2010 (9,600) than it did in 2009 (9,853).

A look ahead

Thompson said one of the challenges this year will be an almost certain reduction in state funding. That’s significant, because the VIM clinic receives about \$232,000 in state funds a year, which is about 29 percent of its entire annual budget.

“The state has not told us how big of a decrease it will be, but when we prepared our 2011 budget we anticipated a 25 to 30 percent decrease in state funding,” she said. “I’m hoping it will be less than that, but at this point we just don’t know.”

She said this year the clinic will also assess the possible future implementation of electronic health records, and seek to shore up its team of volunteer medical providers.

“We expect the nursing students to return here in the spring of 2012, and we’ve been contacted recently by retired physicians and physicians on sabbatical who want to start providing volunteer services for us,” she said.

She said early this year, the weekly hours of the part-time nurse practitioner who sees only walk-in patients were increased from 20 to 32.

“So far in 2011, the monthly average number of walk-in patients is 240, compared to 210 in 2010,” she said.

Thompson also said that during the first five months of 2011 the clinic saw its highest-ever number of medical visits for that time period — an average of 954 visits a month compared with 800 in 2010.

“We’ve been really busy,” she said.

More about the clinic

VIM CLINIC HOURS

8 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday.

8 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday and Thursday.

For more information on the clinic, see www.vimmonroecounty.org.

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