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Guest column: VIM still going strong 5 years after opening

By Nancy E. Richman Special to the H-T Apr 24, 2012

This guest column was submitted by Nancy E. Richman, executive director of Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County Inc.

Five years ago Monday, the Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County free medical clinic opened its doors. As I have heard it told, April of 2007 was a miserable cold month, endlessly raining, and there was great concern about the opening celebration. But on that day, the clouds cleared and the sun shined bright.

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The clinic was inaugurated, and the community celebrated its success in coming together to make it possible for low income, uninsured residents of Monroe and Owen counties to access health care.

The vision of a free medical clinic staffed primarily by retired providers and lay volunteers came to life with the opening of the first Volunteers in Medicine clinic in 1992 in Hilton Head, South Carolina. Since that time, 89 VIM clinics have opened across the country.

The concept was brought to Bloomington as an idea in 2005. With the passionate, visionary and relentless leadership of Dr. Rajih Haddawi, and through the work of a dedicated group of health care providers, (what was then) Bloomington Hospital, Bill and Gayle Cook, city and county government, community leaders and the community at large, Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County has grown into a successful organization that today barely keeps pace with demand.

When VIM opened its doors in 2007, 781 patients were enrolled. By the end of 2007, 3,000 patients were certified, and by the end of that year, we had over 9,300 patient visits (medical, pharmacy and eligibility appointments combined).

Last year, close to 29,000 patient visits were held. In addition to primary care for acute and chronic conditions, VIM offers specialty clinics in the areas of orthopedics, spine, women's health, neurology, diabetes and physical therapy. The generosity of close to 300 clinical providers and 125 lay volunteers has allowed us to expand in so many

essential areas of health care.

It is no surprise that VIM has thrived. In extensive research in 2006, it was estimated that 16-18 percent of the adults in Monroe County and 15 percent in Owen County were uninsured. Further, the Kaiser Commission estimates that, nationally, about two-thirds of the uninsured have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$46,100 for a family of four). This means that in excess of 17,000 adults meet VIM eligibility criteria in the two counties the clinic serves. Some of these individuals will be eligible for the Healthy Indiana plan; many others will not.

A recent study conducted by graduate students from Indiana University's Department of Sociology revealed demographic trends that challenge some common assumptions about who seeks VIM services. In the sample of 741 clinic patients, 56 percent were employed, 17 percent held a college degree or beyond, with another 29 percent having some college education. Twenty-seven percent own their homes, and 62 percent own vehicles. VIM patients, while all uninsured and low-income, nevertheless represent a wide demographic swath of our communities.

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Volunteers in Medicine is a testament to the power of our community to come together on behalf of the most vulnerable among us.

As we celebrate VIM's fifth anniversary, we look back with gratitude for the generosity and vision held by so many individuals in Monroe and Owen counties not only for opening the clinic, but for sustaining it for five strong years.

VIM is truly community-owned, community-operated and community-financed. Thank you, community, and happy birthday VIM!

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