

Vital Signs

Healthcare Is A Right, Not A Privilege **The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland**

More Than Just a Safety Net



The waiting room is full two hours before medical clinic begins.

What comes to mind when you hear the words “The Free Medical Clinic”? If you are like many, you visualize a packed waiting room filled with poor, bedraggled, homeless people. We do see a number of people who fit that description... but you might be surprised at the variety of folk who make up an average night’s clinic. (What you might also be surprised to learn is how far some of these people have traveled, and why they are willing to wait up to four hours to receive care.)

According to the latest statistics on our patient population, *more than 80% of our patients are of working age (19-64)*. Including our teen population, *one in three patients is employed*, often in more than one part-time job. So why did they come to The Free Medical Clinic for care?

Besides lack of employment, a recent waiting room survey received the following responses from patients:

- “I don’t qualify for my employer’s plan”
- “I have a pre-existing condition and my insurance plan won’t cover this.”
- “I can’t afford the co-insurance”
- “My insurance plan doesn’t pay for prescriptions and I can’t afford the co-payment.”

For these individuals, The Free Medical Clinic is more than a safety net; it is **their support system**. Our existence makes it possible for them to *stay employed*.

The Free Medical Clinic is a “trampoline,” for many, **helping people spring back into the workforce**. Each week we offer 15 “lucky” individuals free, pre-employment physicals. (The phone lines open at 12 noon on Monday; patient slots for the week are gone within 15 minutes.) We provide tuberculosis screening and Hepatitis B shots for those who need them in order to obtain or maintain employment.

Employed or not, the existence of The Free Medical Clinic is an **important**

safety valve for the traditional health care system, and a cost-saving one at that. For most of our patients, the choice is between receiving treatment and putting food on the table. Faced with that choice, many go without care and these treatable problems eventually erupt into serious, life-threatening emergencies. Only then does our society provide them with care through emergency room visits and costly hospital stays, which everyone pays for in the end.

Education and prevention is an important but often unmentioned facet of The Free Medical Clinic. Each year, we counsel over 2,000 individuals on preventing exposure to the HIV virus. Our Syringe Exchange Program prevents intravenous exposure to the HIV virus to those addicted to drugs and protects their partners from the virus. The Teen and Women’s Clinics educate patients on a range of health promotion and disease prevention topics. Our Teen Troupe goes to schools and community groups to help kids make responsible

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Volunteer Corner

Focus on the Associate Board

Started fifteen years ago as a way to reach out to and use the talents of young professionals, the Associate Board of The Free Medical Clinic is a vital part of The Free Medical Clinic.



Made up of a wide range of people and occupations, the Associate Board draws on each person's strengths to put together thoughtful, well-organized and successful events. Dean Willmer, President, joined the group in 1997 as a way to meet those who shared his interest in helping others. Dean feels that the group's most noteworthy accomplishment has been its ability to "organize and execute projects on its own, without burdening The Free Medical Clinic's perpetually stretched-to-the-limits staff." Rebecca Hellman joined the group this year as a way to "get more involved in the community." As a director at CIGNA Healthcare, Rebecca felt the group was a natural fit for her. She "enjoys the other members of the 'AB' and their commitment to seeing The Free Medical Clinic succeed" and "the Board's interest in raising awareness and support for The Free Medical Clinic services." Rebecca was one of the top money raisers for this year's AIDS Walk/Run and has agreed to serve as Associate Board liaison for planning of this year's Gala. Michael Sering, Membership Coordinator, describes the group as "energetic and easy-going people who gather at least monthly to figure out ways to promote the mission of The Free Medical Clinic and engage in social activities." Mike enjoys "the flexibility to utilize each person's creativity to accomplish the group's goals," citing that "the group can go from brainstorming to action in a short amount of time."

The Associate Board are masters at putting together enjoyable and successful fundraisers and will be assisting the "senior" board in developing this year's Gala. Its members have been asked to expand their role, including developing and carrying out new ways to recruit clinical volunteers and better educating the community on The Free Medical Clinic's mission.

If you are interested in joining the Associate Board of The Free Medical Clinic, contact Mike Sering at (216) 932-4631, or e-mail at msering@communityreentry.org

2003 AIDS Walk Results

The Free Medical Clinic team raised **\$11,876** at this year's AIDS Walk/Run, placing second in terms of most funds raised by a participating organization. An additional \$10,000 is expected from general funds raised during the Walk/Run. While we will not reach the overall fundraising goal, there is much to celebrate. In a difficult economy, 2003's results were **40 percent better** than that raised in 2002!

Stellar fund raisers were Dr. Pete Cubberley (Medical), Kenny Buchheit (HIV test counseling) and Chitra Walker (HIV test counseling). Congratulations are also due Dean Willmer and the Associate Board for their collective second place finish in the standings. Finally, thanks are due to Lita Townsend of the staff (HIV Counseling) for serving as team captain.

More than Just a Safety Net *(continued from page 1)*

decisions on a range of subjects including preventing pregnancy. (Study after study shows that pregnant moms are more likely not to finish school and perpetuate the cycle of poverty.) And, we offer an educational program for those with possible drug or alcohol problems. Some of these individuals receive the information and support they need to make changes in

their use of substance and/or enter community 12-step programs on their own (most enter our substance abuse treatment program).

Finally, we not only see the problems of our patients, The Free Medical Clinic **advocates within society and the legislative process for their resolution.** The Free Medical Clinic

is a knowledgeable and respected "player" in discussions, panels and even commissions looking at the health care and social needs of the populations we serve.

So, as they say in the advertisements, The Free Medical Clinic is a safety net... but we are SO MUCH MORE!

Thoughts from Gail

Some things have not changed since my role as a volunteer in the early days of The Free Medical Clinic. Patients still look to The Free Medical Clinic for care regardless of their physical, emotional or social pain, financial hardship or health problems. Our commitment to them has not changed.

But the times are dramatically different — regardless of how tirelessly we work, our services only represent a *band-aid on the open wound of the broken health care system in this country*. The waiting room is packed within minutes of opening our doors. Yes, some nights, we regrettably must turn away patients.

And who are the thousands of forgotten faces of patients who seek care at The Free Medical Clinic? They are **our neighbors, friends and family**. Here are just a few of the facts:

- 75% of our patients are unemployed and have no insurance.
- 40% of our patients are heads of household. 33% of the patients who arrive on the doorsteps of The Free Clinic are employed at least part-time, usually in entry level, low-wage jobs, without affordable health care coverage. Others work for employers who do not offer



health insurance for as long as six months from their date of hire.

- They delay seeking care because they cannot afford to pay for the most basic care, even on a sliding scale. They cannot afford necessary medications, given their need to pay for food and shelter. Patients come to The Free Medical Clinic and tell us that they feel desperate because they are dizzy and cannot afford their blood pressure medication. We see patients who ironically face the fear of suffering another panic attack because care and treatment is not affordable.
- Mothers who no longer qualify for Medicaid must juggle job demands with their health, needing to find affordable health care during hours that won't compete with their workday.
- Teens who are terrified to reveal their symptoms to their families. Others are ashamed to admit even their ignorance about their symptoms.

Overwhelming patient volume is not the only challenge we face. The Adult Medical Clinic has tracked a 30% increase in cases with diabetes, 50% increase in cases with hypertension, and 50% increase in cases with high cholesterol. These patients require a greater number of health care services and medications. Health, which so many of us enjoy, is not easily accessible to many of our patients, at least for now.

And who gives tirelessly to those who cannot afford health care insurance? **Our neighbors, friends and families.**

Over 34,000 patient visits, worth an estimated \$15 million, are provided on a remarkable \$3 million budget. Volunteer hours, donated medications, equipment, and supplies make all this possible. Thanks to the generosity of many, the health care crisis in our community has not prevented The Free Clinic from delivering services and programs to those who lack alternatives.

Some things change over time, but in the case of the health care delivery, not for the better. For now and the future, we are the faces of the community who will be there for your **neighbors, family, and friends**.

Gail E. Bromley

Gail Bromley
Executive Director

The Free Medical Clinic as a Teaching Site

Many of the “hidden faces” keeping The Free Medical Clinic free are medical practitioners in training. The Free Medical Clinic collaborates with a number of colleges and schools (within and outside of the Cleveland area) to train a range of tomorrow’s health care professionals, including physicians, nurses, dental students, medical assistants, and phlebotomists. Under the supervision of The Free Medical Clinic’s Medical Director, these students provide quality, free health services, while the students gain valuable experience working with The Free Medical Clinic patients.

Training can be as short as a day-long “shadowing” experience to a comprehensive, three-month residency. Because they come and go so quickly, students’ names (but not their contributions) can be

forgotten. But every now and then, a student shows up who strikes a familiar chord... quite often we welcome back a student who was a volunteer in their undergraduate or even high school days.

Educational partnerships are a win-win situation for The Free Medical Clinic and its educational partners. But it’s also a win-win for all of us. Working with underserved populations provides invaluable skills to health care professionals on how to communicate effectively with patients, at their level and in their language. And the skills learned with this often challenging group of patients can be applied to anyone.

If you appreciate your physician’s “bedside manner,” you may want to thank The Free Medical Clinic!



The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland
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 www.thefreeclinic.org

Nonprofit Organization
 U.S. Postage Paid
 Cleveland, OH
 Permit No. 1982

Mission Statement

The mission of The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland is to provide quality healthcare and related services free of charge to those who lack appropriate alternatives, and to advocate for policy changes that make healthcare available to all.

HELP KEEP THE FREE IN THE FREE MEDICAL CLINIC

Please complete this form and mail to:

The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland
 12201 Euclid Avenue,
 Cleveland, Ohio 44106

Gift Amount _____ Check enclosed. (Please make all checks payable to The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland.)

Please charge my credit card MasterCard VISA

Card # _____ Exp. Date _____

Pledge Amount _____ I will fulfill my pledge in _____ installments beginning _____.

(Please fulfill pledges by June 30, 2004)

- I am making a gift of securities
- I have included The Free Medical Clinic in my will
- Please contact me about planned giving opportunities
- My employer matches gifts. Enclosed is a matching gift form.

Name: Mr./Mrs./Ms. _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Please list my name as follows in donor recognition materials _____