

Wholistic Care For Working Poor

Sponsor: Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center

Location: South Bend, IN

Saint Joseph Health Center has been a fixture in the near west side of South Bend for 17 years. The brainchild of Sister Maura Brannick, the health center has grown from a 400-square-foot converted garage with one volunteer physician to a 10,000-square-foot clinic with 65 volunteer physicians, 11 volunteer dentists and the support of at least 47 community organizations. Since its inception in 1986, the focus of the health center has been providing care to the working poor--individuals in South Bend and surrounding Saint Joseph County who earn less than 150 percent of the federally designated poverty level and are not covered by Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance. A patient receives on-site primary care, and whenever possible sees the same physician on every visit. The cost is just \$5 per visit, if they are able to pay.

Over the last 17 years, Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center has supported the health center to the tune of \$24 million by underwriting its operating budget and providing follow-up services free of charge. Saint Joseph's involvement with the clinic is part and parcel of its mission and role in South Bend, according to Bain Farris, interim president and chief executive officer. "The hospital has been and continues to be the center of health care enterprise in the community. In the future, we'll still play a significant role and be a catalyst for the local community."

To be sure, the community is involved. The South Bend Medical Foundation performs laboratory testing without charge, the equivalent of a \$3 million in-kind donation since 1986. In 2002, clinic physicians volunteered more than 1,100 hours, and specialists in the community donated an estimated \$45,000 for follow-up care. Also in 2002, the health center distributed more than \$146,000 in sample medications donated by 10 local physicians, and accessed \$800,000 in medications from the indigent care programs of 11 pharmaceutical manufacturers.

The health center also offers a variety of services to treat the whole person. A caseworker helps patients qualify for Medicaid and Medicare, at which point clinic physicians continue follow-up care in their own practices. Housing assistance and a food pantry are available, as are literacy and English as a Second Language programs. To better meet the needs of Spanish-speaking patients, the center offers two Hispanic health clinics and hosts bilingual programs from other organizations.

The health center has made a lasting impact on the lives of South Bend's working poor and secured its place in the city's safety net. "We're known in the community," says Carla Bice, director. "People know if they have someone who needs help, they can come to us."

THE PROBLEM: Working poor in South Bend had limited access to care.

THE PLAYERS: Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center and 47 other organizations.

THE PLAN: Establish a clinic to provide very low-cost primary care, on-site testing and medications, and set up a referral network for free-of-charge specialty care.

THE RESULTS: More than 53,000 patient visits and over 54,000 volunteer service hours since 1986; 98 prescriptions filled per day; during the last year, a 34 percent decrease in emergency visits by health center patients.

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