

Sentara Healthcare, Norfolk, VA

Western Tidewater Free Clinic Treats Health Needs of Uninsured Patients Thanks to Sentara Grant

Betty Slagle's face lights up when she sees Pamela Witt, clinic coordinator at Western Tidewater Free Clinic in Suffolk.

"She's my buddy," says Slagle, a Carrollton resident.

The two have known each other for three decades, meeting when Witt worked for another health organization and cared for Slagle's ill mother-in-law. Little did Slagle know that they would meet again under difficult circumstances:

Almost four years ago, Slagle's husband had cancer and had to leave his job. Although the couple never had insurance, they had always been able to scrape together enough money for healthcare. No longer able to do so, Slagle turned to Western Tidewater Free Clinic, which helped 1,360 low-income patients last year thanks in part to a Sentara Healthcare Foundation grant.

"I go in and put \$5 in a jar," she explains, "and my medicines for high blood pressure and cholesterol are \$4 each for 90 days. I used to pay \$230 for a 30-day supply of both."

Slagle is typical of the clinic's patients: Ninety-six percent have at least one chronic illness, and none have health insurance.

Slagle usually visits the clinic every six months for blood pressure and cholesterol checks, but last November she met with clinic co-founder Dr. Desmond Longford off-schedule. The Saturday before, she had rushed to Sentara Obici Hospital's emergency department. She had a terrible pain in her left side, and a mass was found. After follow-up testing, Dr. Longford referred Slagle to the Medical College of Virginia for a hysterectomy. The mass was pronounced benign after the operation, but a polyp in her uterus was cancerous.

"I was lucky they found it and got it out," says Slagle. "The operation was free, and Sentara Obici only collected \$50; they wiped everything else off my bill."

Slagle still faces some challenges but she's optimistic about her future. She's lost weight and cut back on smoking as her doctor recommended. She's so grateful to him, Regina Jones (a nurse practitioner), and Witt.

"I would be in a world of hurt without them," she says.

