

Churches Help Meet Growing Health Care Needs

Without the C.H. Mason Medical Clinic in Milwaukee, Octavious Neal wouldn't have discovered he has high blood pressure.

A 40-year-old school bus driver, Neal couldn't afford the insurance offered through his job, since the premiums cost more than \$700 a month for individual coverage. Then, he learned about the free clinic at Holy Redeemer Institutional Church of God in Christ.

"I couldn't afford to go anywhere to see a doctor and get the kind of medication I'm getting," said Neal, whose condition was diagnosed in early 2009. "Without them, I'd be lost."

Neal is one of nearly 170 patients the clinic saw last year during monthly examinations, although it planned to add a second Saturday to its schedule.

Reopened three years ago by Holy Redeemer after the hospital that operated it shut down, the clinic has three examination rooms and a lab staffed by a medical director and four other volunteers. It offers primary care for patients suffering from such ailments as diabetes, hypertension and asthma, said Lisa Neal, a nurse and health ministry chairperson.

"We have definitely seen an increase in clients since we reopened," Neal said. "Health care is important. Hypertension leads to strokes, which leads to disability and more complications. It's the same thing with diabetes. Those are the two biggest things we see."

C.H. Mason is just one of thousands of small, church-based clinics across the nation that deliver health care to the poor and uninsured. Two other examples:

- The Love of Jesus Clinic in Richmond, Va., offers primary care to uninsured patients, including many Latinos. It is a partnership with the non-denominational Richmond Outreach Center.
- Since 1995, numerous churches have partnered with Louisville-based Touched Twice Ministries to provide free health screening clinics to low income residents in central Kentucky.

Augmenting these church-based efforts are 200 larger, Christian-based community clinics that are part of the Christian Community Health Fellowship (CCHF.) The uninsured clients they see are likely to still need services even after the House of Representatives passed health care legislation in March, said CCHF's Steve Noblett.

Even if 32 million people are able to obtain insurance because of the new law, 14 million will still lack coverage, said Noblett, who pastored a Full Gospel church before becoming the fellowship's executive director.

"If everyone suddenly gets insurance, there's still no doctors for them to go to," said Noblett, pointing to disparities between the number of physicians serving suburban areas and America's inner cities. "One thing CCHF does is spend a lot of time talking to medical students and helping them understand their calling as a missional [endeavor]."

Missions is an integral element of the services at Richmond's CrossOver Ministry, which expects to see nearly 6,000 patients in 2010. Director of Operations Julie Bilobeau points to their theme verse of Deuteronomy 15:11, which talks about being open handed to the poor and needy.

"I believe there will always be people who will have difficulty accessing quality, compassionate care," Bilobeau said. "I would love to wave a magic wand and the need for CrossOver would go away and I could retire. But,

realistically, I don't think that's going to happen."

Not all clinics are free. Siloam Family Health Center in Nashville, Tenn., uses a sliding scale. Nancy West, president and CEO, said that encourages patients to get more involved in their treatment and allows them to maintain their dignity.

Started in 1989 as a ministry of Belmont Church, the center received \$147,000 in funding (7 percent of its budget) from 30 churches last year; 25 more provided volunteers, prayer support or other donations. It expects to serve 19,500 patients in 2010, with 80 percent of them immigrants.

"Christ said to heal the sick and care for the poor," West said. "We all need each other to make that happen."

Located in downtown Orlando, Fla., one of the newest outreaches to the working poor originated with two members of First Baptist Church of Orlando. Grace Medical Home opened Apr. 7 and offers check-ups, vaccinations, X-rays and other services.

The center requires patients to be working or recently laid off. It serves individuals and families making up to 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines, or about \$44,000 for a family of four.

"Insurance typically runs \$800 for a family of four," said Rick Fletcher, one of the founders. "If you're making \$44,000, you don't have \$10,000 a year for insurance."

Although a special event at First Baptist raised \$67,000, two hospital systems each put up \$100,000 and various community sources donated another \$800,000 to launch the facility.

While many smaller churches can't afford to back such an ambitious endeavor, they can offer basic health screenings, exercise classes or other means of promoting good health, Neal said. "I don't think it's just churches," the Milwaukee nurse

said of the need to offer health care. "It's the right thing to do. Where there's a need, you should help provide."