

Free Clinics in North Carolina: A Network of Compassion, Volunteerism, and Quality Care for Those without Healthcare Options

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Ida and her husband Jim both worked full-time. Ida's job did not provide health insurance, but Jim paid extra so his insurance policy would cover both of them. Jim developed multiple sclerosis, which progressed rapidly causing Jim to lose his job. Despite their limited financial resources, they were able to continue his insurance through COBRA. Unfortunately, they did not have the resources to continue hers. Ida was faced with managing her hypertension without insurance. She turned to Urban Ministries Open Door Clinic (ODC) in Raleigh for treatment and medication. A routine screening mammogram revealed a lump in Ida's breast. Uninsured and frightened, she turned again to the ODC. ODC coordinated care and, within a month, Ida had a mastectomy and had begun a chemotherapy regimen. One year later, Ida is cancer-free and has found a new job with healthcare benefits, leaving the ODC with an opening for another person in need without other healthcare options.

Nancy, a young woman in her late 20's, came to ODC because she didn't feel well. Diagnosis: diabetes mellitus. Her hemoglobin A1c was 15, and other clinical measures were similarly high. Nancy entered ODC's specialized diabetes management program, the Diabetes Care and Risk Reduction Program. By meeting regularly with a certified diabetes educator; making significant changes in her eating and exercise habits; and receiving medications, a glucometer, and test strips at no charge, Nancy has brought her hemoglobin A1c to 5.2 and other clinical measures are in line. She is able to move toward her goal of getting pregnant, something that six months ago was not advisable due to her health status.

Approximately 1.4 million North Carolinians are uninsured, and that number is larger when statistics include individuals who lack health insurance at a given point during the year. It is a common misconception that low-income individuals are eligible for Medicaid coverage. To be eligible, one must fit

into a few limited categories, such as being pregnant, being under 18 years of age or younger, age 65 and older, or before being disabled. There are also maximum resource and income levels allowable for each category. Simply being poor does not qualify one for governmental healthcare. Free clinics are a community response to the crisis facing these uncovered individuals. The clinics are by no means a comprehensive solution, but they represent a compassionate, economical, and proven source of

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healthcare. More than 50% of free clinic patients are employed, many working more than one job to make ends meet. However, they work for low wages and for employers who do not offer affordable healthcare insurance. It is in this environment that concerned individuals began to seek ways to improve access to healthcare in their communities.

What is a Free Clinic?

Free clinics rely on community collaboration and the spirit of compassion that leads persons to volunteer their services to assist their less fortunate neighbors. Free clinics in North Carolina reflect the needs and resources of their individual communities. There is no template, yet there are similarities. They are non-profit organizations, directed by concerned community leaders. Typically, the clinics provide services through a

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combination of paid staff and volunteers—physicians, nurses, pharmacists, laboratory personnel, and support personnel. They share other common characteristics:

- *Free care.* There is little to no charge for services or prescriptions.
- *Target population.* The target population includes people who have low-incomes and are uninsured (i.e., have no health insurance, no Medicare, no Medicaid, no Veterans Benefits). Low-income determinations are made by the individual clinic and range from 100-200% of federal poverty guidelines.
- *Core values.* Delivery of high-quality, compassionate care based on a belief that lack of income should not prevent access to healthcare. Free clinics place strong emphasis on providing non-judgmental, compassionate care while respecting the dignity and self-worth of every patient.
- *Volunteer driven.* The majority of services are provided by volunteers, who receive no compensation for their services.

Volunteerism is the major difference between free clinics and other safety net providers. Services are provided by individuals who are at the free clinic because they want to be. Volunteers consistently say that they receive more than they give in their encounters with patients. Physicians, with no managed care constraints or productivity requirements are able to practice medicine as they see fit. It reminds many of them of the practice setting that lured them into medicine in the first place. A collegial atmosphere exists in free clinics, with frequent communication and interchange about patients among nurses, physicians, and pharmacists. This atmosphere, with leading professional provider volunteers, results in the delivery of high-quality medicine to free clinic patients.

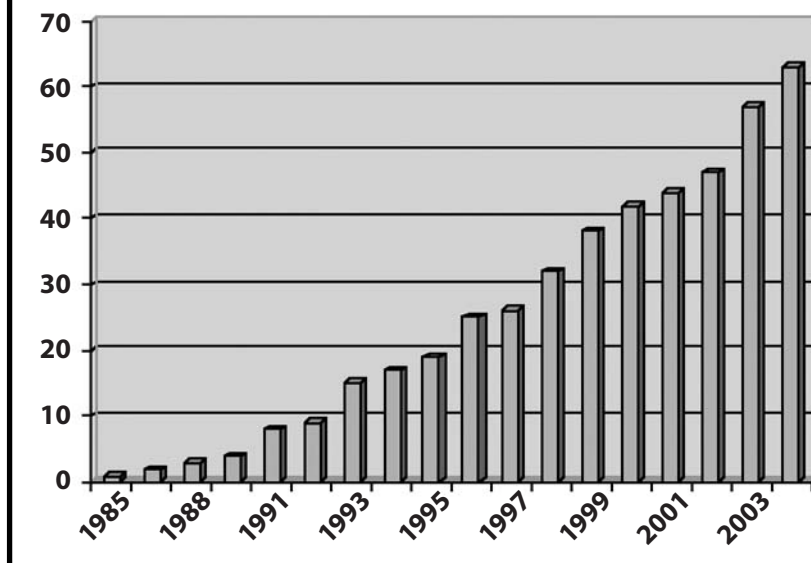
Development of Free Clinics in North Carolina

In the 1970s, concerned physicians began free clinics in the Winston-Salem area. Those clinics operated from area churches, but were not able to sustain operations and closed in the late 1970s.

In 1985, Dr. Don Lucey and other community physicians developed a free clinic, the Open Door Clinic, at the Urban Ministries in Raleigh after recognizing that lack of health and resulting poor health status were causes of unemployment and increased the potential of homelessness. Urban Ministries Open

“It’s places like this that renew your faith in humanity.”

Figure 1.
Growth of Free Clinics in North Carolina



Door Clinic is one of over 60 free clinics serving uninsured North Carolinians at the present time (see figure 1).

North Carolina leads the nation in the number of free clinics with 53 medical clinics, approximately 25 with state-licensed pharmacies (10 with stand-alone pharmacies or pharmacy programs). In 2003, North Carolina’s free clinics served more than 69,000 patients, dispensed 450,000 prescriptions, and provided \$50 million in healthcare services.

Free Clinic Services

North Carolina’s free clinic services vary by community, depending on needs and resources of the individual communities. Services may include the following:

- Medical—acute episodic medical treatment; management of chronic diseases,
- Dental,
- Pharmacy,
- Laboratory and other diagnostic tests,
- Physical therapy,
- Podiatry,
- Behavioral health,
- Medical specialty services—including ophthalmology, orthopedics, cardiology, and dermatology among others, and
- Social work.

Even though services are provided at no charge, most free clinic patients receive the full-range of services needed for their medical condition. Patients receive medical care, laboratory services, referrals for other diagnostic or therapeutic services, health education, prescription medications, and specialty care. If a needed specialist is not available on-site, most free clinics have arrangements for community physician specialists to see patients in their offices.

Patients are emotionally invested and touched by the concerned and high-quality care they receive in these free clinics. As one Urban Ministries Open Door Clinic patient recently stated, "It's places like this that renew your faith in humanity."

Financials and Free Clinics

Free Clinics receive no federal or state funding. Because they receive no revenue from their patients, free clinics must turn to their communities for support. They are funded with cash and in-kind donations from a variety of sources including:

- Individual contributors,
- Churches,
- Businesses,
- Hospitals,
- United Way, and
- Foundations.

In 2004, free clinics raised over \$13 million from private funding sources. Because they use volunteer providers and secure donated supplies, medication, and ancillary services, free clinics were able to leverage these gifts into over \$50 million in healthcare services to their patients.

In 2004, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation announced a five-year, \$10 million grant to the North Carolina Association of Free Clinics for the support of existing free clinics and the creation of new clinics in underserved areas.

Challenges Facing Free Clinics

North Carolina's free clinics face multiple challenges as they continue to offer compassionate healthcare services to those without other options, including:

- *Meeting changing demographics.* Providing culturally appropriate services to diverse racial/ethnic populations is challenging. Access to interpreters in rural areas of the state is increasingly difficult.
- *Volunteer recruitment and retention.* Free clinics' dependence on volunteers for service delivery requires them to continually recruit and retain licensed volunteer providers.
- *Finances.* Sustaining funding to operate the clinics once they have been operating for several years is challenging. Start-up grants are generally available, but they are short-term funding solutions.
- *Infrastructure issues.* Lack of funding to support staff is an issue. Most clinics operate with small staffs who must recruit, retain and support volunteers, and develop and maintain systems to ensure high-quality care delivery.
- *Liability concerns of volunteers.* While there is no history of a malpractice suit brought against a North Carolina free clinic, the specter of liability is prominent in the minds of most volunteer providers. Clinics must find an affordable solution for offering liability protection for providers.

Free clinics do not profess to be the answer to the crisis of access to healthcare for North Carolina's uninsured, but they are a continuing stop-gap measure until there is a more comprehensive funding stream for indigent medical care. As Don Lucey, MD, states, "In 1985, when we started Open Door Clinic, we thought we'd be around for only a couple of years, until the country dealt with this problem of access to healthcare. Twenty years later, we're still waiting." **NCMJ**

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Services in English and Spanish
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TTY for the hearing impaired: 1-800-976-1922