

## In hard times, health clinics abound

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DANBURY -- When Dina Valenti, the director of the Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free Health Clinic, surveys the city today, she sees opportunities that weren't around when the clinic opened in 1997.

And rather than feel threatened by the competition, she's elated.

"It's so wonderful," she said. "It's so nice to be able to tell a patient, 'We can't help you, but this place can.' "

Along with Danbury Hospital, there are now five clinics where adults can be treated in the downtown:

The AmeriCares Free Clinic on West Street, which provides free medical care to the uninsured and underinsured.

Two federally-funded clinics -- the CIFC Community Health Center on North Street and the Community Health Center on Delay Street -- which work with the uninsured, but also provide care to patients on Medicaid.

The Seifert and Ford Family Community Health Center on Main Street, which is run by Western Connecticut Health Network, the umbrella organization that manages both Danbury and New Milford Hospitals.

A fifth -- the Samaritan Health Center on Rose Street -- has stepped into the gap left when the Hanahoe Clinic run by Dr. Ann Hines closed and now offers free pediatric care to the city's children. It is funded by private donations.

"There are different clienteles and different needs," said Eva Tan, Samaritan Health Center's executive director. "But there are many needy and these are difficult times."

In different ways, the clinics serve the city's uninsured, the underinsured, families below the poverty level, those who get medical insurance through Medicaid -- groups often referred to collectively as the working poor.

In the current hard economic times, that population is increasing as people lose jobs with health



insurance and find jobs -- when they can -- from companies that don't offer them that benefit.

"Each has a slightly different mission," said Dr. William Delaney, executive medical director of the Seifert and Ford center. "We're grateful the two federally funded clinics are here, because they handle Medicaid patients well."

"It's a need that exists across Connecticut," said Mark Masselli, president and chief executive officer of Community Health Centers, which has operated a clinic on Delay Street since 2008, "and increasingly, it's more difficult for the poor and working persons and families to access health care."

The five clinics in town work in cooperation with each other and with Danbury Hospital to make sure patients who need care get it.

The leaders from the hospital and five clinics -- one of which, the Seifert and Ford Family Community Health Center on Main Street, is owned and operated by the hospital -- have met to discuss ways to integrate their care.

"I think of it as one of the most critical things we can do for the uninsured and underinsured," said Dr. Patrick Broderick, chairman of emergency medicine at Danbury Hospital and medical director of the AmeriCares clinic.

Broderick said the clinics provide care in a small, friendlier setting than a big hospital can offer. Patients often also get to see the same doctor on repeat visits -- something that doesn't happen in emergency room visits.

"That's one of the biggest things they do -- provide continuity," he said.

Having the clinics also means people are being cared for properly and more cost-efficiently. Rather than waiting until they get really ill and then go to the hospital emergency room or be admitted as an inpatient, the clinics provide primary care that keeps people out of the hospital.

James Maloney, executive director of the Connecticut Institute for Families, which has operated the CIFIC clinic for a year, said it now works in tandem with the hospital to move patients who arrive at the hospital emergency room but don't belong there.

"If it's not an emergency, they can make an appointment directly into our system," he said.

Masselli said the Community Health Center on Delay Street now has an electronic medical record system that is integrated with the hospital, so doctors at the hospital and doctors in the clinic can keep track of tests and medications.

That helps, he said, when patients at the clinic need to be referred to specialists at the hospital.

The clinic, which opened in 2008, now has about 8,000 patient visits a year, Masselli said, making it the fastest growing health facility in the city. It is now expanding its clinic space from 6,000 square feet to 13,000 square feet and planning to offer dental care.

"This is health care, and if you're in it for a dime, you're in it for a dollar," Masselli said.

The CIFIC clinic has six, full-time physicians and three, full-time physician assistants or advanced practice nurses on staff. Its plans for the future include building a 50,000-square-foot facility on the site of the old police station on Main Street.

"We're getting a lot of referrals," said Maloney, the former Democratic congressman from the 5th District.

Delaney, executive medical director of the Seifert and Ford Clinic, said the clinic now is a place where medical students in the hospital's residency programs in internal medicine and primary care learn how to treat patients in a community center setting, which is very different than learning in a hospital setting.

"How do you prevent hospitalizations?" Delaney said. "How do you prevent re-hospitalizations, which has become a very strong issue for Medicare? How do you deal with cultural and language differences?"

Delaney said the issue of access is also increasingly important. The Seifert and Ford clinic, for example, is working to provide same-day appointments for its clients whenever possible.

Masselli said health organizations must move beyond access issues in the future and concentrate on quality of care.

"It's not just a question of access," he said. "It's access to what?"

Broderick pointed out that with Danbury Hospital now allied in a partnership with New Milford Hospital, there's a need to expand some of these clinic services north into the New Milford area.

"There is still a great need," he said.

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