

Clinic workers struggle to keep migrants healthy

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BANGOR — "If I want to eat greasy food and drink pop all day, I can."

That's not an uncommon response to dietary advice handed out by social workers, doctors and nurses at the clinics run by the Bangor-based Migrant & Rural Community Health Association (MARCHA).

"We have to work with people a long time, say, one or two years, and after that constant re-enforcement and discussion, we gradually see some changes," said Velma Hendershot, who became executive director of MARCHA a month ago.

"But not always. Some people never change after all that work. For the staff it can be real disheartening, because they see little benefit of their efforts."

MARCHA is a 15-year-old, federally funded, non-profit association of community and migrant health centers. There are centers in Benton Harbor, Holland, Eau Claire and Bangor and a nutritional center for women and children in Dowagiac.

"We target special populations, or the medically indigent — those who cannot use other health care or cannot pay," said Hendershot.

MARCHA submits grant applications yearly for money from the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

"We are reviewed yearly by the federal government," said Hendershot. "We've certainly experienced some financial cuts, but I don't think we'll be cut off completely. We've been around for 15 years."

The centers are a first line of defense against illness, treating its clients' ailments just as a family doctor would, Hendershot said.

"We'll take anyone," she said. "If you think you could be eligible for a reduced payment, we'll fill out an application on you, look at your income, verify and document it, look you over, and put you on a sliding fee scale."

"Either you will pay 100 percent of the fee, or you will pay some percentage of it."

Clients can also learn some healthy habits from workers at the center.

"We do a lot of teaching, trying to change living habits if they're not appropriate," Hendershot said.

Workers counsel youngsters about nutrition: "We teach them about the cheeses and juices versus the candy and pop."

Hendershot is the daughter of migrants; she worked the fields of Michigan when younger. Her parents were concerned with migrant-worker problems — in fact, Hendershot's mother held the executive director position from 1974 to 1979.



Velma Hendershot, MARCHA director

FOCUS ON VAN BUREN

shot's first cases dealt with a pregnant teen who denied her own pregnancy. "She was feeling child movement in her womb, yet she denied she was pregnant right up to the time of delivery."

Preventative health care is another area of concern for MARCHA, Hendershot said, but "Unfortunately, not much money goes into that anymore."

"We are involved with the acute-care approach to the patient more now as opposed to the holistic health care approach to the patient."

Federal funding cuts have brought on the change. "We also have a dentist and hygienist on staff," said Hendershot. "In addition to caring for the patient, they teach in schools, and in the summer go to migrant camps to teach the children and adults such things as how to brush teeth properly."