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Downtown clinic for homeless braces for new wave of patients

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The number of people in line on Monday or Thursday evenings for free medical care at Helping Hands Clinic downtown has begun to increase in recent weeks.

Clinic staff fears they will be in crisis with an onslaught of patients seeking care once Shands at AGH closes.

In an effort to keep pace with current demand and brace for an expected new wave of patients, clinic organizers are forced to recruit additional medical professionals -- doctors or nurse practitioners -- as volunteers to help fill the gap.

Zenta Gomez, the clinic's volunteer coordinator, said it is not uncommon to have as many as a dozen new patients at the clinic each night with a nightly average of 35 patients. The clinic, located at 419 N.E. 1st St. in space at First United Methodist Church, operates with an average of 2 to 4 doctors on site each night.

In 2008, the clinic logged 1,371 visits for 399 patients compared to 1,173 visits for 282 patients in 2007. The projected patient load this year is 500. The clinic, which opened 1989, provides medical care, psychiatry and acupuncture.

The clinic focuses on the homeless, those at risk of homelessness and the uninsured. Homeless and uninsured individuals are seen on Monday evenings and women's health is provided on Thursdays.

As more people show up each week, Gomez said there are some times when the clinic is forced to turn people away.

"It's a challenge, but we rarely turn people away. But those times are increasing," she said. "And there are people who show up and see the long lines and walk away that week because they know we have limited doctors."

Most patients at the Helping Hands Clinic are in need of primary care for things like hypertension, wound care, or upper respiratory problems.

Nicole Lamoureux, executive director of the National Association of Free Clinics, said the nation's 1,200 free clinics around the country are experiencing increasing loads, largely due to the economy.

"These are people who were working and never thought they would need a free clinic," Lamoureux said.

She said while few free clinics receive federal funding, the clinics served 4 million patients in 2008 and are projecting that number will jump to 7.5 million to 8 million by year's end.

"That's a 40 to 50 percent increase, while most have seen donations decrease by 20 percent or more," she said. "So they are finding ways to serve and it often means doing more with less."

The Salvation Army on East University Avenue was the clinic's home for 15 years before the move to First United Methodist Church.

Clinic co-founder Randy Stacey said it would be ideal to have three or four providers -- doctors and nurses -- each night so no one is overlooked and can all be seen within the two-hour window.

If successful in recruiting at least 8 to 10 more volunteers, Gomez said it would allow the local clinic to see three or four additional patients each night.

Funding to run the clinic comes from a combination of private donations, grants from the county and city along with a three-year grant from Blue Cross/Blue Shield Foundation.

Brendan Shortlee, vice president of the clinic's executive board, has spent the last 16 years volunteering each week coordinating patients and the medical staff. He's seen patient load escalate over the years.

"We stuff in as many people as we can each week and we maximize our volunteers," he said. "It's a miracle we see everyone."

He said potential volunteers only need to consider serving a couple hours each month in order to make an impact in the number of patients who can be seen each week.

"That will make a world of difference," Shortlee said.

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