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By Erin Andersen

Clinic with a Heart is 'God's blessing'

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Free walk-in clinic provides medical, dental, physical therapy and chiropractic care to the uninsured and underinsured.

Ed George needs a job. But before he can work, he needs surgery to repair a hernia. The trouble is, George doesn't have health insurance. He can barely make rent, let alone pay for a surgeon and hospital. Without the surgery, he can't work, can't get health insurance, can't pay for the operation. It's a vicious circle. And not an uncommon one. Tuesday, George found Lincoln's Clinic with a Heart. The clinic matched him up with a doctor. Soon he will have surgery, and hopes to be healthy enough to work again. "God pointed me here," he said. "It's so gratifying to see people willing to help people," George said.

"There is such a need for help." It was a need Dr. Rob Rhodes worked to meet during a 2002 medical mission trip to Reynosa, Mexico. As he was providing medical care in a Mexican dump, something struck Rhodes: If we can do this in Mexico, why can't we do this in our own backyard? "He came back with a dream," says Cindi McNair, executive director of Clinic with a Heart. One year later, Rhodes and his church, St. Mark's United Methodist, opened Clinic with a Heart. The free walk-in clinic is staffed by volunteers and paid for with community donations.

Nearly five years, 3,000 patients and more than 300 volunteers later, Clinic with a Heart is open three nights a month, providing medical, dental, physical therapy and chiropractic care to the uninsured and underinsured. Interpreters are on hand to translate if needed. Clinics are held the first, third and fourth Tuesdays of the month from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at the Center for People in Need, 3901 N. 27th St. Each night is sponsored by a different Lincoln church: St. Mark's, Southwood Lutheran and Saint Paul United Methodist. In April, a fourth clinic, on the second Tuesday of the month, will be sponsored by Sheridan Lutheran Church. And soon, thanks to a new partnership with the University of Nebraska Dental College, a free dental clinic will be held from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday nights at the college to serve Lincoln's uninsured, the poor and those referred from Clinic with a Heart, Rhodes said.

Volunteers, donations and partnerships with businesses, hospitals, foundations and community groups are key to the clinic's success. With such a vast group of workers, everyone shares the load, Rhodes said. And everyone reaps the benefit of doing something to help others, said Cheryl Peterson, clinic coordinator from St. Mark's. Clinic with a Heart has saved taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid emergency room costs, according to McNair. More importantly, it links people with doctors, dentists, therapists and medical programs they may otherwise never have found.

The purpose of Clinic with a Heart, besides providing immediate medical treatment, is connecting people with a "medical home" - a doctor or dentist who can become their primary provider, McNair said. "Our goal is not to be a free clinic," she said. "Our goal is to be a community

connector." The clinic is an "entry point to health care." Many of its clients are people who don't know where to go, can't afford medical care or don't know where to begin in accessing health care. A "medical home" ensures people they will receive needed referrals to specialists and programs and help in securing needed prescriptions. Sometimes that "medical home" is another program or agency such as General Assistance, Medicaid, People's Health, Nebraska Indian Urban Center, Lancaster County Medical Society, the Medication Assistance Program or Health Partners 360, which provides specialty referrals, said Joan Anderson, director of the Lancaster County Medical Society.

On clinic nights, a volunteer pharmacist is available to help explain prescriptions and answer questions. Actual one-time prescriptions for generic medications are provided by Wal-Mart at \$4 each and paid for by clinic sponsors. McNair hopes other local pharmacies will participate as well. Forty people checked into the clinic on Tuesday. Five went to see the dentist, Dr. James Jenkins - "Mr. February" as he called himself because he is the volunteer for February. "Two had toothaches and will need extractions," Jenkins said. One had a broken denture and was too embarrassed to smile anymore. Jenkins made contact with another dentist on the February team to fix the tooth and get the patient smiling again. And then there was Luisa. The 10-year-old shyly came in to see Jenkins. She moved to Lincoln from Colombia last month and speaks very little English. She and her brother need school dental checks, her father explained. Although Jenkins couldn't do the school-required checkup at the clinic, he helped Luisa's father figure out the system. And he did a quick check of Luisa's teeth. "Very nice," he told the smiling little girl, then gave her a choice of toothbrushes: pink, yellow, purple. Luisa selected purple.

In the waiting room, patients read books, knitted, crocheted or just stared blankly into space. Some needed their blood pressure checked. One had a cut finger that just wouldn't heal. Many just didn't feel right. "We're seeing lots of colds and flu," a volunteer said in passing as she took another patient back to be examined. Carolyn Smith Dewey, 42, was one of them. She came to the clinic three weeks ago for a lump on her throat. Dr. Miles Tommeraasen saw her but didn't have the equipment at the clinic to deal with the lump. He invited her to his Lincoln office free of charge so he could take care of it. "He was so gentle," Dewey recalled. He gave her a shot, a prescription for antibiotics and an appointment for followup. She hadn't planned on returning to the clinic, but then she got a horrible cold. "It's the worst stuff I've ever had," Dewey said, resting her feverish head in her hand. "My body hurts. It hurts to stand up. I'm weak. I'm cold, then I'm hot, then I'm cold and then I'm hot. All I am able to eat has been two cans of chicken noodle soup, and I'm hungry." She had a temperature of 100 degrees, the nurse told her. Dewey works for a fast-food restaurant. She's been too sick to work for the past few days. She doesn't have health insurance. "I've never had any medical insurance," she says. "This place is God's blessing," Dewey said of the clinic.

A lot of people coming to Clinic with a Heart are "the working poor," said Jo Sheets, volunteer coordinator for Southwood Lutheran Church. Their jobs offer no health insurance. Or they are between jobs. Or they are new to the country/county and have not yet met qualifications for government medical assistance. Many need immediate medical help and cannot safely wait until an appointment comes open at People's Health Center or the Nebraska Indian Urban Center. The heartwarming success stories are numerous: the 20-something man who lost his arm in an accident who was fitted with a prosthesis; the newly divorced woman who was sick and still weeks shy of receiving health insurance; the woman with high blood pressure who could not afford the medication so she was taking her deceased sister's 3-year-old medication, at a rate of one pill a month; and the newly employed college graduate who knew he had strep throat but could not afford the test and medicine.

Cheryl Peterson, clinic coordinator for St. Mark's, remembers the very sick man who came in with chest pain and breathing difficulties. The doctor determined he had a life-threatening infection around his heart. They called an ambulance, and Peterson rode with him to the hospital. Two weeks later, he returned to Clinic with a Heart looking for Peterson. He gave her a bear hug and told her: I would have died if not for this place. She still gets teary-eyed recounting the

moment. That's the thing about Clinic with a Heart: Everyone benefits. "I think we (volunteers) get more out of it than what we give to the patients," she said. Sheets echoed the sentiment. "This is the best thing that has ever happened to me," she said. "I love it. I am absolutely hooked."

Reach Erin Andersen at 473-7217 or eandersen@journalstar.com.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Clinic with a Heart is always looking for sponsors, partners, financial donations and gifts of personal hygiene products to fill goody bags, which are offered to every patient.

To find out how you can help, call (402) 421-2924 or write to P.O. Box 22851, Lincoln, NE 68542-2851.

CAPTIONS

Mike Robertson (left) has his vitals checked by Margo Remmers while Ronnetta Vivier waits her turn at Clinic with a Heart. WILLIAM LAUER/Lincoln Journal Star

Dr. Shawn Semin (left) checks the lungs of Mike Robertson, who showed symptoms of influenza, at Clinic with a Heart. The volunteer clinic offers primary care and dental checks for people who can't afford to see a doctor. WILLIAM LAUER/Lincoln Journal Star