

Durham clinic offers physical, spiritual and emotional care

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Every day, a group of men and women dressed in scrubs, lab coats and street clothes gathers above the women's shelter of the Durham Rescue Mission to spend time in prayer.

The men and women pray for individuals that they have seen that week, people struggling with chronic illnesses or those who need surgery or a pair of eyeglasses. But the words bouncing off of these walls are far from empty—the people praying are the same people who are finding solutions to these problems.

“What we have found is that often, when people have been living on the streets, they have not been able to care for themselves, so we provide that care,” said Chris Garrett, founder and executive director of the Samaritan Health Center.

According to its website, the Samaritan Health Center's goal is to help eliminate Durham's health disparities through donated talent and resources. The center provides accessible, holistic medical and dental care that focuses on the physical needs of the patient. It also focuses on the social, emotional and spiritual issues that affect health for the homeless and underserved residents of Durham.

Practically, the center provides primary health care with a focus on the individual's needs, including pediatrics, dermatology, dentistry, and minor surgery. In the past, the clinic has also offered eye care services and eyeglasses, although it is currently looking for an eye doctor to fill that role.

Elizabeth Brill, operations manager for the Samaritan Health Center, said that services at the clinic are free of charge for any uninsured Durham county resident with an income of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. In 2010, the clinic saw 1,308 patient visits. That number is expected to double in 2011.

“Some people don't like going to the doctor because the average time people spend with a doctor is seven minutes,” said Brill. “People feel like their doctor isn't taking time to listen to them and hear their concerns. I'm frequently told that people just appreciate that we listen to them.”



Staff photo by Kelcie Landon

Phyllis Wright, a volunteer phlebotomist at the Samaritan Health Center, sets up her lab station and prepares to draw blood from a patient.

Care at the clinic is delivered by 25 medical doctors, five dentists and over 200 other volunteers. They spend as much time with their patients as necessary, getting to know them and their lives, learning their successes and struggles.

“These are people who really care about helping people,” said Samantha Heuertz, a second-year medical student who has been volunteering at the Samaritan Health Center since fall of 2009. “This is their passion, and everyone is extremely motivated.”

Phyllis Wright, a Durham resident and volunteer phlebotomist, said she wanted to be a part of the clinic's work because of the positive and professional atmosphere.

“We have some of the best doctors and nurses here from hospitals in the area,” Wright said. “I like to be involved with helping people.”

The impact of the Samaritan Health Center is tremendous. According to a recent community health assessment, over 27 percent of Durham residents do not have health insurance. According to a survey conducted by the clinic, 20 percent of these people did not go see

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a doctor last year simply because they could not afford it.

“The impact is palpable on the thousands of patients we have seen. For many of them, we have gotten their diabetes and [high blood pressure] under control, which leads to better general health as well as significant savings,” said Garrett. “If you go to the emergency room at the hospital, they have to treat you, but that's the worst-case scenario for everyone involved.”

According to a study done by the Raleigh News and Observer, the average cost of an emergency department visit is over \$1,300. With free primary care and medications that keep the ER from becoming a necessity, the Samaritan Health Center is saving money not only for individuals but also for the state as a whole.