

House of Hope celebrates grand opening of medical clinic

By Ben Weathers

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Joseph G. Knight Jr. came to the doctor's office on a recent morning complaining of a sore throat and a cold.



Paul W. Gillespie - Maryland Gazette

Mario Berninzoni, executive director of Arundel House of Hope, talks about the community effort that helped fund the medical clinic in Glen Burnie. The clinic will provide health care services to homeless, low income and uninsured people.

Knight, who is homeless, has no medical insurance, no job and very little money that he receives in disability. But at this doctor's office, it doesn't matter.

The Arundel House of Hope's medical clinic in Glen Burnie provides free medical care to anyone who is without health insurance and living at 200 percent below the federal poverty level — a family of four with an income less than \$44,100 a year or an individual making less than \$21,660.

Before the clinic opened, Knight would use the emergency room at nearby Baltimore Washington Medical Center to receive primary care, he said.

"This is better than any place I've ever been to," Knight said. "The people are very friendly, very efficient."

On Thursday, roughly 40 people gathered at the House of Hope's medical clinic, located just a few doors down from its Day and Resource Center at 514 N. Crain Highway, to celebrate its grand opening. The clinic's all-volunteer staff moved into the new facility in November.

Prior to that, physicians had been seeing patients in a 10-by-12-foot back room of the center for the past year. House of Hope officials estimate that over the past year, the clinic has seen some 450 patients in 600 office visits.

The new clinic has three medical exam rooms, a waiting room for patients and office space for volunteers.

While the majority of patients that the clinic sees are Day and Resource Center regulars, House of Hope officials aim to extend care beyond the local homeless population to the community at large.

"We want to avoid people using the emergency room as primary care," House of Hope Executive Director Mario Berninzoni said. "Our goal now is to serve the wider community."

The 1,500-square-foot facility was renovated over last summer and fall using \$50,000 that was raised in private contributions. At least \$10,000 was donated by the local Glen Burnie, Lake Shore, Linthicum and Parole Rotary clubs.

Steve Johanson, a member of the Lake Shore Rotary Club in Pasadena and an engineer, served as project leader overseeing the renovation.

"I thought it was an excellent idea and a service that the community is desperately in need of," Johanson said. "It's very exciting and extremely rewarding to see an organization like the House of Hope that is open to all who don't have medical insurance. What a rewarding and beautiful thing that is."

Another Rotarian and architect, Peter Notari, donated plans for the renovation. Rotarians also donated between 500 and 600 hours of manpower to complete the project, Johanson said.

Dr. Ashwin Nanavati, a retired Baltimore Washington Medical Center surgeon, is one of five physicians who volunteer at the clinic.

Providing medical care to the local homeless population comes with its own set of challenges, Nanavati said.

"This population has mental illness ... they have alcohol, drug and smoking abuse," Nanavati said. "They have no friends, no family — no support system."

Because many of the clinic's patients struggle with substance abuse, the clinic does not prescribe narcotics, Nanavati said. One day a month, a psychiatrist meets with patients.

With a lean operating budget, the clinic also is in need of special services, including blood and lab work, as well as X-rays. While BWMC has been helpful in donating equipment and furniture, Nanavati said they could be doing more.

"I can do very little but diagnose and refer," Nanavati said. "BWMC has been a great help, but they can do better."

BWMC spokesman Kevin Cservek said the hospital is collecting medical supplies to donate to the clinic as part of its 12 Charities in 12 Months giving campaign and hopes to continue its relationship with the clinic.

"We encourage our staff to volunteer and assist clinic," Cservek said. "Several of our physicians donate time on a regular basis."

The clinic is open about 10 days each month, including each Wednesday from 9 a.m. to noon. A case manager works with patients to determine if they are eligible for the clinic and to provide follow-up care.

If a patient isn't eligible, the clinic will refer them to other state and local services and programs, said case manager Ann Marie Bond. The clinic will see any patient at least once.

House of Hope has formed a relationship with nearby Arundel Pharmacy to fill prescriptions. Volunteers will regularly help patients to purchase medicine, House of Hope's clinic coordinator Susan Bagley said.

To make an appointment, call 410-863-4888. The clinic does not see children.

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