

Free clinics hit with more patients, less funding

20 July 2009, By EVERTON BAILEY Jr. , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Health insurance and doctors were unthinkable luxuries for George Anderson of Redding, laid off nearly a year ago when his book distribution company filed for bankruptcy.

Like countless others stripped of health insurance because of the recession, Anderson and his family were forced to turn to a free health clinic. In all, about 4 million Americans are expected to visit the nation's 1,200 free health clinics this year - a surge that comes as clinics face a drop-off in financial support.

"Over the last year, free clinics have seen patient load increase by 40 to 50 percent," said Nicole D. Lamoureux, executive director of the National Association of Free Clinics. "People who just last year had [health coverage](#) are now out of work and need to have their health care needs met."

For Anderson, 48, who had high blood pressure, and his wife, who contracted pneumonia, the free clinic was a necessity.

"We felt like we were teetering on the edge of a cliff with all the other bills we had to pay for and if we had to pay those hospital bills too, that would have tipped us over," said Anderson, who has since found another job.

Groups like the CIGNA Foundation, which funds clinics in Philadelphia and southwestern Connecticut, say they're spending less on clinics even as funding requests have jumped by 50 percent in the last year.

"Our spending is down by 15-20 percent since last year," spokeswoman Gloria Verrone said. "We've decided not to eliminate working with organizations that need our help, but we have had to decrease funding amounts in order to keep those relationships. We also haven't been able to accept any new groups this year but we're hopeful to start doing so again by next year."

In Connecticut, Stamford-based AmeriCares, an international nonprofit relief group, operates three free clinics in Danbury, Bridgeport and Norwalk. Officials have seen patient visits increase 20 percent at the clinics this year, said Karen Gottlieb, executive director of AmeriCares Free Clinics.

The Danbury clinic, AmeriCares' busiest, has about 350 patient visits a month. Danbury had 3,000 unique and repeat patients visits last year, Norwalk had a little over 2,700 and Bridgeport saw 1,600 patient visits.

Gottlieb predicts the patient volume from all three clinics could reach around 8,000 by the end of the year.

The clinics, which accept walk-ins and appointments, provide physicals, lab and diagnostic testing and specialty care in cardiology, diabetes and other areas, all free of charge. Patients must have a photo ID, proof of income and cannot have medical insurance.

The three clinics have 350 volunteer physicians, registered nurses and Spanish and Portuguese translators to help aid patients, Gottlieb said.

She also mentioned that they have seen 79 new volunteers so far this year, which is up from 48 during the same time last year.

In cases where patients need treatment beyond what the clinics can provide, they can be transferred to a local hospital for free care courtesy of the hospital, said Gottlieb.

"The point of the clinics is to provide health care to people who fall through the cracks," she said. "People who have Medicaid and are uninsured have the ability to go to federally funded community health centers, but they charge on a sliding scale. So we take the patients who don't have the money to pay."

The clinics receive as much as \$17,000 per year from the cities where they are located, but are funded primarily with donations coming from private foundations, corporations and local church and civic groups. The Danbury clinic is also helped by a partnership with Ridgefield-based Boehringer Ingelheim, a pharmaceutical company, that gives medication and medical products.

Gottlieb acknowledges, however, that not everything has been on the upswing.

"We're busier than ever at a time when donations are down," she said. "People are not giving what they used to give."

Services provided by the clinics are lifesaving, patients say.

Clarke Barre, 62, from Danbury, said he had a problem going to a free clinic; he never would have guessed that he would need such services.

"I am currently an uninsured person who has always been employed and always been insured, but recent events have changed that," he said.

Without a job and medical insurance, Barre said he did a Google search for free clinics in his area and sought out the Danbury clinic to get tested for discomfort.

Blood tests revealed that he had prostate cancer.

Barre said he would not have been able to pay for his treatments without the help of a free clinic.

"I haven't had to pay a nickel," he said. "My understanding is that we are in the tens of thousands at this point.

"I might not be alive if it wasn't for clinics such as these."

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