

# Parish helps doctors open medical clinic to fill gaps

By Mary Benson  
Catholic News Service

ERIE, Pa. — The medical clinic opening soon in the basement of the St. Paul Parish youth center will have the simplest of accounting systems — its doctors and staff won't be paid and its patients won't be billed.

The St. Paul's Neighborhood Free Medical Clinic will be working to "fill the gaps" in health-care coverage for residents of the racially and ethnically mixed neighborhood that includes a growing number of Hispanics and Vietnamese.

"This is to fill gaps. That's all," said Dr. Vincent Jenco, a retired obstetrician/gynecologist who grew up in the neighborhood. He and Dr. Henry Karpinski, also retired, plan to operate the clinic with the help of volunteers.

"I'm not fond of the present two-tier system of health care that we now have," said Jenco. "My contention has always been that the little guy doesn't get very much."

According to plans for the clinic, the "little guy" will get, at the very least, basic medical attention. Modeled after a successful program in Roanoke, Va., the clinic will serve the uninsured and the underinsured.

The clinic is not designed to compete

with existing health services. Patients who are on public welfare and receive medical assistance will be referred to clinics at Erie's neighborhood centers. Those who are adequately covered by insurance will be referred to regular health-care providers.

Karpinski said the clinic will focus on preventive care and maintenance for Erie's portion of the 35 million people in the United States who have no insurance or inadequate coverage.

The two doctors, who had worked together before retirement at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Erie, have discussed for the past two years the idea of opening a free clinic in order to make some sense out of the health-care quagmire.

"I think this (free clinic model) will go over the country shortly," said Karpinski. "The doctors are being bashed so much that they have to give something back to show they're not just money-hungry."

So far, about 30 physicians — from pediatricians to oncologists — have either inquired or signed on to volunteer at the clinic. Dietitians, nurses, psychologists, and maintenance and office personnel have also expressed interest in the venture. Interpreters have agreed to provide help when needed.

## Nurse

Continued from page 5A

Arab food, there must be some Arab in you?" Lopez chuckled.

In addition to their work at the center, Laurie and Marie have been invited to birthday parties at the homes of staff members who live outside the clinic. They have also taken several short trips, including jaunts to Bethlehem, the Dead Sea and other parts of Jerusalem.

The center itself is located next to a mosque, so several times a day workers in the center hear the call to prayer.

Religion, Lopez said, "is everywhere, and you think about it constantly."

"It makes you want to sort things

out in your life, and be honest with yourself," she added.

The trip has also helped confirm her decision to go into nursing, Lopez said.

"It's made me much more excited about nursing," Lopez said. "I love working with disabled children."

Lopez said she would like to volunteer again in another country at some point after she becomes a nurse. In addition, she said, "I would like to use my experience in cross-cultural nursing to work with Hispanic populations, or with Palestinian immigrants."

She has also come to realize that nursing is more than just "giving somebody a pill and leaving the room."

"The patients have emotional needs," Lopez continued. "You have to care for the whole person."

This will make me more sensitive to the other needs," she concluded.

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