

Health

Diocesan providers aim at helping uninsured

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Two months ago, Valerie Smith lost her job. When she went to apply for a new one, she was told she needed a pre-employment physical.

But because she'd lost her health insurance along with her job, she decided to go to Corpus Christi Center, an outreach program staffed by health-care volunteers and operated by Corpus Christi Parish, Rochester. The program provides free and low-cost care.

As a result of the physical, she learned she had hyperthyroidism.

Because of the disease, Smith said, she has lost 80 pounds, has felt weak and has been unable to work.

"I'm between a rock and a hard place," she said.

But the Corpus Christi Center staff has helped Smith obtain medication to control her hyperthyroidism, and a doctor has been monitoring her.

"They have really gone out of their way to help me," she said of the center's volunteers. "It makes you feel good to know that somebody is in your corner."

Smith is one of thousands of people in the Diocese of Rochester with no health insurance who benefit from Catholic institutions and health-care programs.

Corpus Christi Center, St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell, St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira, Corning-Painted Post Healthcare Ministry and St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester (which with Park Ridge Health System recently formed Unity Health System) are among the institutions in the diocese offering health-care services to people who can't pay for them.

Donations, government and private grants, and revenue from insured or paying patients helps to cover the cost of the free and low-cost care offered by Catholic health-care institutions, health-care authorities said.

Many people who need such care — like many of Corpus Christi Center's clients — are working, but barely making ends meet. Meanwhile, their employers don't offer insurance and the clients can't afford their own plans, according to Eileen Hurley, the center's director. Yet the



Dr. Rick Micoli, DDS (above), provides dental services for Gwendolyn Owes following a routine exam by Jayne Heetderks, RN, (below) at the Corpus Christi Center, July 3.

Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

center's clients often make too much money to qualify for Medicaid, she added.

Hurley said her center tries to steer clients into Medicaid or a low-cost private plan, but such options aren't always feasible.

"They are the working poor," she said of the bulk of her clients. "The reality is they'll never fit into our current system."

Diocesan health specialists cited a growing need for health-care services for the uninsured and underinsured who are too rich for Medicaid and too poor for anything else.

Aware of that need, members of the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community recently visited Corpus Christi Center. They were looking at the center as a possible model for a program in Corning, according to Linda Crowe, RN, a parishioner at Immaculate Heart of Mary in Painted Post. The southern tier cluster comprises St. Mary's, St. Patrick's and St. Vincent de Paul parishes in Corning, in addition to Immaculate Heart.

Nurses, nurse practitioners and physicians recently joined to form the Corning-Painted Post Healthcare Ministry, Crowe said. The group has already performed free physicals for area youngsters going to summer camps, and plans to offer weekly services in a Corning food pantry, she said.

"Our goal is to offer free health care to people who are uninsured or underinsured," Crowe said.

Catholic hospitals in the diocese also have many programs serving patients unable to pay.

St. James Mercy in Hornell, for example, recently opened a podiatry clinic for people without insurance, according to Sister Pat Prinzing, RSM, vice president for mission. She added that 86 percent of the hospital's dental clinic patients have no insurance, and pay according to a sliding scale.

Like other health-care officials, Sister Prinzing noted that many patients don't qualify for Medicaid but can't afford insurance.

"These services are really for anyone who falls through the cracks," she said of the clinics.

She added that nearly a third of the hospital's budget is devoted to serving low-income patients with no insurance or who are on Medicaid.

St. Joseph's in Elmira has had to cut back on such programs as children's services and eliminate its maternity unit in the past decade to keep up with the cost of serving patients who aren't adequately insured, according to Robert M. McNamara, vice president for finance.

"The poor folks would come to the hospital for these services, and we just couldn't afford them," he said.

He added that St. Joseph's staff has been cut 20 percent in the last decade, but he stressed



that the hospital has operated in the black in recent years.

McNamara also said more and more working people are unable to pay for their health care.

"We're finding more people in the category of having jobs, but perhaps they're seasonal, or they're working part-time, and they're underinsured," he said.

St. Mary's Hospital offers a wide variety of services targeting the uninsured and underinsured, and spent \$2.7 million last year on services that helped the poor, according to Sister Betsy MacKinnon, DC, vice president for mission services.

Among those services is a health-care center at the hospital that primarily serves the homeless, the unemployed and the working poor. About 22 percent of her center's patients have no insurance and pay sliding scale fees, according to Lucia Castillejo, the center's manager.

"We try to collect whenever we can," she said. "(But) we would never ever refuse anyone because of lack of ability to pay."

Meanwhile, Bonnie Hadden, who directs St. Mary's Community Health Division, said about 30 percent of the 3,000 people the division serves are on Med-

icaid. But, she noted, most of the program's other clients, for a variety of reasons, have no means to pay for health services.

The division targets the homeless and poor for care through various programs at soup kitchens, storefronts and shelters.

"We serve a lot of the working poor," Hadden said. "Some are working in part-time employment, or in minimum wage jobs. The dollars (they make) won't stretch to cover care."

Regardless of their ability to pay, such patients and clients are still afforded the best treatment possible, according to diocesan health-care officials.

"One of my expectations ... of all my staff and my physicians is to treat everybody as kings and queens," Castillejo said.

Gwendolyn Owes, a 50-year-old part-time school bus driver and mother of four grown children in Rochester, said that's the kind of treatment she has always received at Corpus Christi Center, which provides her with low-cost dental care.

"I usually give \$5 or \$10 when I go," she said. "I sometimes wish I had more to give. They treat you like an individual — not like a thing, not like some poor beggar."

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