

HEALTH

People in need turn to community health centers

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

The next time you hear nurses or doctors complain amidst the red tape of reimbursement that they'd rather work for free, take note. There are places they can.

Such conversation, Deacon Ray Defendorf said, is what drove him to create the Corning-Painted Post Health Ministry Center. It opened last September in the former St. Patrick's rectory in Corning. There, professionals do indeed work for free, and patients don't have to pay.

Partners in the project, with the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, are Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier and the Corning Vicinity Council of Churches.

"The idea is to help people find a way to use their gifts to minister to others," said the deacon, pastoral associate for St. Patrick's Church, one of the four Corning-Painted Post parishes. He also is former director of public relations for Corning Hospital.

"We looked at a number of models," Deacon Defendorf said. They included the Family Health Center in Elmira coordinated by Elaine Caso, RN, of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Elmira, and active with the Friends of Mt. Savior.

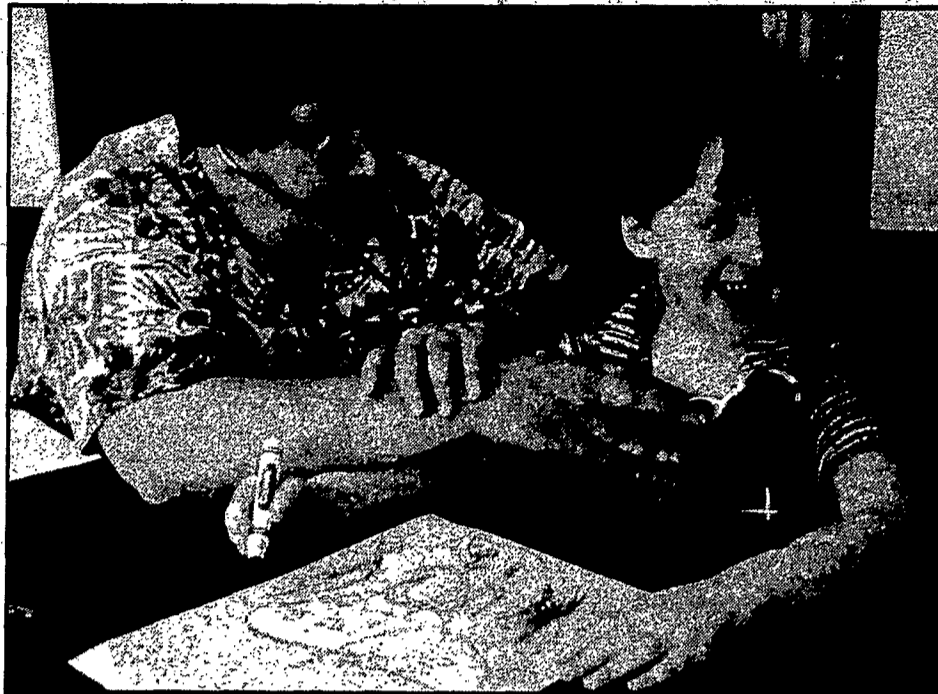
Another model was the Corpus Christi Center, a Corpus Christi Parish outreach ministry in Rochester.

"That's the dream," he said, "but it's located in a very urban center and we are not. While they are open 48 hours a week, we have a patient load two to three hours a week. ... It's (Corpus Christi Center) just such a wonderful ministry."

But that's just what Kim Lesso of St. Vincent de Paul Church, Corning, however, says of the Corning center. She used it for the first time July 9 for her daughter Kaitlyn, 5.

"It has been highly publicized in the bulletins, but you think it's never for you," she said. "... I never paid attention to what it was for."

Lesso facilitates a small Christian community, and a nurse who is in her group explained that Lesso definitely qualified for help, she said. Kim and her husband, James, had been on Medicaid while working at home with their three children. Two of the children needed constant care, with strictly-observed daily patterns because of



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Registered Nurse Mickey Dunn, a parishioner of St. Patrick's Church, Corning, checks the heartbeat of Katie Lesso, 5, July 9 at the Corning-Painted Post Health Ministry Center in the former St. Patrick's rectory.

their autism.

Although the two now work — Kim as a Social Security consultant and James as a substitute teacher — they faced a 40-day gap before Kim's medical insurance kicked in.

They'd been concerned with a downturn Kaitlyn was experiencing in her autism, a type that involves panic attacks that lead to rage and behavior where she injures herself. Lesso said an hour's appointment with a psychiatrist cost her \$150, and on top of that, the 16-ounce bottle of Depakote he prescribed was priced at \$120.

"I knew the cure but I couldn't afford it," she said. But upon turning to the health center, she said, she received a voucher for the syrup medication.

"In two hours I had that medicine for nothing," she said, especially pleased that it should help her daughter to the point where she could attend a "regular" kindergarten class this September.

Bonnie Sirianni, RN, who volunteers twice a month at the center, said, "For everybody who walks through the door we try to do what we can."

"People are on disability, waiting for Medicaid, others have lost jobs and their insurance, there are all kinds of stories that

you hear."

Patients come from Elmira, Watkins Glen, Hammondsport, Wayland, Montour Falls and elsewhere, she said. They make an appointment through Catholic Charities, 1-800-581-9228. The center is open one afternoon a week, and is staffed by a registered nurse, receptionist and registered nurse practitioner or doctor.

"People who have need of a service should have the service," said Caso, who started the Family Health Center in Elmira in 1983 when a recession hit hard. Caso, who works full-time at Arnot Ogdens Medical Center School of Nursing; Teri Gulati, RN, also of Our Lady of Lourdes; and Joan Barneski, RN, of North Presbyterian Church, Elmira, have kept the center going since. Open three afternoons a week, the center was begun in space offered at the former Office of Social Ministry. The facility is now in the YWCA (607/733-5575).

Noting the Scriptures say to "do good to those who need it," Caso added, "all of us feel that way."

"People are having a great deal of difficulty making ends meet and getting health care they need. They have to have groceries, have the car in operation — those are the most important things," Caso said. More people are working part-time jobs that don't offer health benefits, she said.

Largely for their work with community health centers, diocesan Consistent Life Ethic Awards have gone to Linda Crowe, RN, of the Corning center and Sister Barbara Lum, SSJ, board member and co-founder of St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center in Rochester, also a health center. Sister Lum also works at Corpus Christi Center.

Such community health centers have common ways of operation. Usually no questions are asked about eligibility. If you're there, you need help, they realize.

A major service they provide is physicals for day care, camp or jobs, which otherwise can cost \$100-150 not counting lab work. They commonly treat ear infections and chronic conditions that require regular blood work or medications, for example. Referrals are made for surgery.

They work with donations — grants, a few dollars from patients, individual donations and so on. Caso's budget is about \$400 a year.

Walkers, canes and other items may be donated to them and then loaned or given to patients.

Pharmacies, hospitals and physician specialists may provide services for which the patient isn't charged.

Regarding the centers in Rochester:

- Corpus Christi Center, 142 Webster Ave., is in its 21st year, according to Eileen Hurley, director. Since its first three years as more of a drop-in center, it has evolved into a full range of health and human services, including dentistry, she said.

The staff includes three paid and 120 volunteer workers. They can refer people to specialists who provide their services free of charge.

Hours are 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday, and often two evenings a week.

In the past year the center has counted close to 15,000 visits, for medical and other needs.

- St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center, 417 South Ave., will be five years old in December. It is sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Three women religious work full-time at the center, which also has three part-time, paid nurse practitioners, and 70 lay and professional volunteers.

Hours are 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday, and until 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The center opened a satellite in River Park Commons on Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, in March. The apartment complex donated a one-bedroom apartment and utilities for the office.

Sister Christine Wagner, SSJ, director of the center, estimated 2,400 patient contacts a year, plus another 3,000-5,000 people who drop by to use the phone, to pick up soap, shampoo and razors, and to obtain other non-medical services.

While providing most health care and counseling, the center also provides literacy/GED programs, and has begun drug and alcohol evaluations and treatment.

Regarding the multitude of services, Sister Wagner said, "It's a double-edged sword. We're filling a need but have to ask why is the need so great. The numbers are up 30 percent a year since we started."

The center now is hoping to expand into a building next door, which would double its size.



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