

Faith-based alliance seeks health care for working poor

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NEW ORLEANS (RNS)—Noemi Rasgado and Antoinette Hamilton are in the same boat. Both are sick, and both work. But neither makes enough to afford health insurance, forcing them to go without health care as the clock ticks down toward an emergency.

But Rasgado, with her sinus infection, and Hamilton, with her chronic high blood pressure, found medical attention for the first time in years at a clinic in New Orleans created to treat people like them. They hope it will be a permanent medical home.

Mary Mackey (center), a registered nurse at the Faith Health Alliance clinic in New Orleans, and Rocio Paiz (right), a health coach, stand in the exam room with patient Noemi Rasgado. (RNS PHOTO/Chris Granger/The Times-Picayune)

Founded on philanthropy and patterned on a similar clinic that has treated more than 50,000 patients over 23 years in Memphis, Tenn., the [New Orleans Faith Health Alliance](#) aspires to be the doctor's office for a single category of patients—people who are working but without health insurance.

That would be Hamilton, a 48-year-old single mother of two who used to have medical insurance before Hurricane Katrina blew away her job nearly five years ago. She found work again, but her new job didn't come with insurance.

Without medicine, monitoring and someone to encourage her to diet, Hamilton was headed into stroke territory, kidney failure or some other calamity.

Similarly, Rasgado, another single mother who works as a hotel housekeeper, said she hadn't seen a doctor in four years. She was ineffectually dosing her sinus infection with over-the-counter remedies until she came away from the clinic with two prescriptions.

Each paid \$20 for her visit.

A study done for the alliance estimated there are 80,000 uninsured workers like Hamilton and Rasgado in the city—almost 20 percent of the population—including most of the city's undocumented workers, said Bob Marye, the clinic's fundraiser.

"They're living with tumors, with undiagnosed diabetes, with chronic hypertension," Marye said. "And eventually it catches up with them. And when they get sick, they show up in the ER. And you know what that is—about the most expensive kind of medicine you can practice."

The clinic opened against the backdrop of a national debate over health care reform, but the proposals passed recently still will not extend health care to all of the thousands of patients the New Orleans clinic seeks to serve.

The reform debate "muddies the water certainly," said Marye. "You might think there'd be no more need for us." However, even after all of the health care provisions go into effect, at best the local uninsured might fall from 20 percent to around 7 percent of the total population, he insisted.

The clinic hopes to provide medical care under a new model that pays attention to patients' "body, mind and spirit," in the words of founder Janet DiLeo Wade.

The clinic is so new it has fewer than 20 patients in its files now, so what that holistic approach will look like has yet to fully emerge.

The enterprise so far is financed by major gifts from [Catholic Charities USA](#); Kaiser Permanente, the giant health insurer and medical care provider; [Baptist Community Ministries in New Orleans](#); and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Louisiana.

Patients pay \$15 to \$75 per visit, depending on their income, said Luanne Francis, the clinic's executive director. Patients see two nurse practitioners, who are backed up by two volunteer doctors.

The clinic offers primary medical care and refers patients to specialists who agree to donate a few appointments a month.

On entry, each patient is asked to sign an agreement in which he or she pledges to arrive on time for appointments, follow the doctor's orders and, where appropriate, cooperate with a "health coach" at the clinic.

Clinic managers say they hope to cultivate a culture where patients are treated like family, where spirituality is recognized as a form of well-being, and talk of personal spirituality is invited, supported and respected.

While the clinic's founding ethos is based on faith, it's not exclusive to one particular faith, Wade and others said. Although the clinic is located above First Grace Methodist Church, and its governing board includes two members of Catholic Charities, no church or denomination owns the enterprise, Wade said. The local clinic's founding ethic is the universal "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," she said.

In hiring the clinic's initial employees, Wade said, managers looked for a special ingredient. "We've now got people who are looking at this almost as a ministry. They're certainly not being paid enormous salaries. They feel this is a calling.

“There’s no doubt in my mind this is God-driven.”