

New Braunfels clinic offers safety net for the working poor

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NEW BRAUNFELS—At the corner of San Antonio and Hickory streets sits a doctor's office seemingly like any other. But it's like none other in town.

Dental assistant Dina Freeman cares for a patient at the New Braunfels Volunteers in Medicine clinic. (BGCT PHOTO)

Patients sit in the waiting room where they read magazines, and children play with toys on the ground as their appointment nears. Mothers fidget with their purses. Young men tap their toes to songs playing in their minds. They wait here with a variety of ailments— diabetes, mental health issues and toothaches—many of them preventable with regular medical care. It's care none of these patients can afford.

And here at the New Braunfels Volunteers in Medicine clinic, they don't have to pay for it.

If there are gaps in this country's health care system, the people here surely are falling through them. Some work multiple jobs to support their families, but none have insurance. Some have never been offered it. Others lost it when they changed jobs, if they had it to begin with. This clinic is the only net that keeps the new Braunfels working poor from falling to the floor face first.

"Without us, they have nowhere else to turn," said Jennifer Malatek,

executive director of New Braunfels Volunteers in Medicine.

In Comal County alone, the uninsured working poor number about 16,000, according to Malatek. In the last few months of 2008, the clinic served more than 800 patients. As word has spread, the clinic has become more popular, having served an equal number in just the first six weeks of 2009.

“Our goal is to become a medical home for people who are caught in the middle and don’t have the opportunity to have health insurance or have government funded programs for whatever reason,” Malatek said.

“We’re really serving, for a lack of a better term, the working poor who are caught in the middle. This can become their medical home so they can stay healthy, stay at work and stay in school.”

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The New Braunfels Volunteers in Medicine clinic served more than 800 uninsured working poor.
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The clinic was birthed out of Oakwood Baptist Church and while other congregations have come along to help, Oakwood remains the clinic’s primary financial supporter and source of volunteers. The off-campus clinic, coupled with a counseling center and kids after-school program, is one of the ways the church remains committed to caring for its community, one of the pillars of Texas Hope 2010, a Baptist General Convention of Texas initiative to share the hope of Christ with every Texan.

“We just thought if you can care about somebody and show them you’re concerned about them, you certainly a lot better opportunity to share the gospel and let them see Christ in that manner. Our people have really enjoyed that,” said Roxi Vanstory, Oakwood’s executive administrator, who believes many communities could use a clinic like the one in New Braunfels.

Beverly Baldwin, an Oakwood member and retired registered nurse who volunteers at the clinic, said she enjoys serving the patients. She's had the opportunity to build relationships with some of them, which has led to opportunities for her to pray with them and share her faith.

"I especially enjoy working the patients," she said. "I get to see some of the patients more than once. I get to work with them one-on-one, which is what I missed."

Where they see a need, Oakwood members want to meet it, Vanstory said. "They want to get their hands dirty to do the work of the Lord." As a result of the church's commitment to outreach, people are becoming healthy, children are doing better in school and lives are being transformed by the power of Christ.

There's much more to do, Vanstory said, and the church is seeking God's calling to do all that it can.

"We want to be an integral part of our community," she said.

For more information about New Braunfels Volunteers in Medicine, call (830) 632-5131. For more information about Texas Hope 2010, visit www.texashope2010.com.