

Reorganization for county's free clinic

By Christine Spangler, Union managing editor | Posted: Tuesday, February 10, 2015 8:25 am

The Rock River Free Clinic is undergoing a reorganization of sorts, planning to hire an executive director and reassessing how best to provide medical services in the wake of the Affordable Care Act.

Jeff Mason, a member of the clinic's board of directors, spoke to the Fort Atkinson Rotary Club Monday at the American Legion Dugout. He provided an overview of the free clinic, including where it has been and where it expects to be in the next year.

Located in the Jefferson County Health Department Annex in Jefferson, the clinic is "one of the area's best-kept secrets," Mason said, noting that it provides primary healthcare to Jefferson County residents who are below 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines and who have no health insurance coverage.

Dr. David Rutledge serves as primary care provider and medical director of the clinic, which during 2014 had 917 patients enrolled, accounting for 2,403 patient visits. The average patient was a single white female between 45 and 65 years old with an income below \$12,000 per year.

Mason said that about 34 percent of patients are Hispanic and 49 percent are Caucasian. They come from all throughout Jefferson County, including 32 percent from Fort Atkinson, 29 percent from Jefferson, 14 percent from Whitewater and the remainder from 18 towns.

The top five health issues seen at the clinic are heart disease, diabetes, depression/anxiety, respiratory infection and back pain. Mason said that on-site services include physical assessments, care for chronic and acute diseases, health education, laboratory testing, and referrals to other medical providers and community resources.

"In 2012, we went from part time to five days a week, with about half of our patients having chronic health conditions such as diabetes," Mason said. "These require prescription drugs many times.

"Initially, the clinic was paying these costs, but to continue doing that would have bankrupted the clinic," Mason said.

What turned that around was the clinic's investment in computers, software and a part-time coordinator, Penny Walsh, for the Patient Prescription Assistance Program (PAP).

"Penny helps patients with the paperwork to obtain, free of charge, necessary brand-name medications from pharmaceutical companies," Mason said.

"It's a success story," he added, reporting that during 2014, PAP netted more than \$235,000 in medications, for which the Rock River Free Clinic had to pay in the past.

Removing that financial burden was a big reason that the clinic ended 2014 with a never-before-seen \$32,656 net income. That helped the board of directors as it considered whether to hire a full-time executive director.

"Longtime clinic board members have rolled up their sleeves and helped run day-to-day operations for years,"

Mason told the Rotarians. "As a result of the rising number of patient visits and detailed analysis of best practices, it was decided that we would search for an executive director."

The person should help the free clinic wade through the changes accompanying President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, sometimes called ObamaCare.

In 2014, the clinic saw 475 new patients at the same time it helped 235 of its most chronically ill patients get the health insurance they needed through the health insurance marketplace at healthcare.gov and BadgerCare.

"Many of the people we've served in the past are low income. Now, those under 100 percent of the poverty level are in BadgerCare," Mason said. "The clinic steered almost 240 patients into BadgerCare."

Thus, the free clinic now serves those with an income threshold at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level, people who are uninsured, and people who are not eligible for Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance or BadgerCare.

"We must stay on top of this. The need isn't changing, but the population is changing. We have to adapt our eligibility guidelines to that," Mason said, citing this as one reason for seeking an executive director. "We are seeing four to five new patients every week and more than 400 one-time acute-care visits annually."

He told the Rotarians that the Rock River Free Clinic is the only such clinic in the region that does not have an executive director.

"Four volunteers spent over 100 hours this past summer visiting the free clinics in Dane, Walworth and Dodge/Jefferson counties," Mason said. "The purpose was to discover best practices at these clinics to improve the care for our patients."

The group came away with many ideas that they condensed into a one-page comparison chart. In November, the board of directors discussed the findings and unanimously voted to support the search for an executive director.

Mason cited two other pieces of news regarding the Rock River Free Clinic. It has joined the National Association of Free Clinics and the Wisconsin Association for Free and Charitable Clinics, enabling it to garner discounts on medical supplies, expertise in operations, networking and sources for funding.

In addition, the clinic purchased an electrocardiogram (EKG) machine to replace an older, obsolete model. The Fort Atkinson and Jefferson community foundations helped cover the cost.

Mason said that, in addition to the foundations, the clinic is supported by donations, grants, the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties and Tomorrow's Hope. Fort HealthCare last year provided laboratory tests, radiology procedures and physician and support services valued at \$500,143, while the Jefferson County Health Department provides clinic space and support services.

He said community support is important and tax-deductible donations are welcomed. Visit www.rockriverfreeclinic.com for information on giving.

Volunteers also are needed, including clerical persons, interpreters, social workers and others. Call (920) 674-7442 if interested.

The clinic, located at 1541 Annex Road in the Health Department's lower-level clinic area, the Rock River Free Clinic opens at 9 a.m. every weekday. Closing hours are 6 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday; noon on Tuesday, and 5 p.m. on Friday.