

Thousands in county rely on Rock River Free Clinic

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, August 11, 2015 8:05 am

JEFFERSON — In Jefferson County, approximately 6,406 people don't have health insurance.

That's thousands of people not receiving basic primary care. Thousands suffering from chronic health issues without access to the ongoing care they need. Thousands unable to get the medicine they require.

And, according to Kristin Wallace, less than 25 percent of those uninsured are visiting the Rock River Free Clinic in Jefferson.

"It's staggering," said Wallace, who serves part time as executive director of the Rock River Free Clinic. "Even with the expansion of BadgerCare (and the Affordable Care Act), ... there are still at least 5,000 people in our county who don't have health insurance that the clinic is not seeing (as patients)."

The mission of Rock River Free Clinic is to provide access to free health services through health professionals dedicated to caring for low-income and uninsured individuals.

Services provided by the clinic include physical assessments, care for chronic and acute diseases, health education, laboratory and radiology testing and referrals to other medical providers and community resources.

"(We offer) basic primary care, in a nutshell," Wallace said. "Although, I think, we find ourselves primarily in the care for chronic and acute diseases category."

Common chronic diseases treated include diabetes and asthma.

"Healthcare education — obviously in any primary care setting, you want to educate people about their disease," Wallace said. "We do very limited laboratory and radiology testing here, but if patients need more services, we work with the hospital to provide the lab and radiology. Then we also have referrals to other providers and other community resources."

The Rock River Free Clinic was established in 2003 by Dr. Greg Gehred as a 501 (c)3 nonprofit organization managed by a board of directors.

"At that time, there were some very dedicated physicians and other health service volunteers that just wanted to



CLINICAL NEED

CLINICAL NEED — The Rock River Free Clinic opened for three hours a week in 2003 as a place for those without health insurance in Jefferson County, Whitewater and Cambridge to receive basic primary care. In 2012, the clinic hired a full-time doctor and nurse, courtesy of Fort HealthCare and the Jefferson County Health Department, and expanded to 36 hours a week. The Health Department donated part of its building's space for the clinic. — Daily Union photos by Alexa Zoellner.

serve the population of people who couldn't afford care," Wallace said.

She noted that the clinic was open just three hours a week from 4 to 7 p.m. every Thursday and that it was a "hub of activity." One physician might show up or five, depending on schedules, along with another 20 or so volunteers.

"It almost felt like a real active emergency room or urgent care place," Wallace said. "Sometimes there would be people in line starting at noon, waiting to get into the clinic. Sometimes they could see everyone in line and sometimes they couldn't — it depended on how many physicians showed up."

Nurses and doctors would triage people in order to make sure those with the most urgent health issues were seen first.

But being open only three hours a week was less than ideal, Wallace said.

"People get sick every day of the week," Wallace pointed out. "Sometimes they couldn't serve everybody, and then the patients' follow-up care was limited — would they see the physician next Thursday or could they find a doctor in the community to follow up with? It was just harder to manage for ongoing care."

In 2012, with support from the Jefferson County Health Department and Fort HealthCare, the clinic was able to increase its hours from three to its current 36 hours per week. Wallace explained that the board, comprised of members of the hospital, county and area communities, "really got together and brainstormed an idea of making this a full-time clinic.

"The hospital knows that if they serve people in the primary setting, then hopefully they won't end up in the ER when things are at a higher stage and more detrimental (to a person's health)," Wallace said. "They also saw that they could allow patients with less-severe (symptoms) to be seen in a doctor's office — which is the appropriate setting — instead of them ending up in the ER."

The Rock River Free Clinic is open weekdays. On Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, its hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday, the clinic is open 9 a.m. to noon, while Friday hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

With the county and hospital's help, the clinic also was able to hire a full-time physician and nurse.

"Dr. David Rutledge is our full-time physician and Bonnie is our full-time nurse," Wallace said. "The hospital actually pays for the salary of the physician and Jefferson County pays for the salary of the nurse."

Not only does the county donate the nurse's salary, but it also donates the space for the clinic. The hospital has donated computers and provides services for the patients referred to the hospital by the clinic.

"The county, Fort HealthCare and the clinic — all of us are together to serve the patients, which is super cool," Wallace said. "We're very lucky. I don't know of another free clinic in the state that has that kind of a three-way partnership."

That partnership has allowed the clinic to increase the number of people it has been able to serve, Rutledge said.

"Even within the first month of full-time operation, we were seeing three times the number of patients per week that we were able to do in the Thursday night clinics," Rutledge said.

Prior to BadgerCare's expansion and the Affordable Care Act, the clinic was seeing an average of 70 patients per

week.

Currently, the clinic averages 35 to 40 patients per week, Wallace said. That gives it the capacity to see another 25 patients in the area who are without insurance.

“It’s been good all around,” Rutledge said. “Now, a large portion of the people that we had been serving are able to get healthcare benefits through BadgerCare or the Affordable Care Act.”

Wallace agreed wholeheartedly.

“When the Affordable Care Act came through and BadgerCare expanded, we really lost a number of our clients who were able to get on healthcare insurance,” she said. “That’s awesome. This is a great thing. We’re very happy with that. Ideally, we would love everyone to have health insurance.”

However, if everyone had healthcare, the Rock River Free Clinic could go out of business, because not having health insurance is one of the requirements for being a patient there.

The clinic has three criteria for accepting a patient, Wallace said. First, patients must live in Jefferson County, Whitewater or Cambridge; second, they have no health insurance; and third, they must meet income criteria based on household size, the number of dependents and working income.

“When we get a phone call for a new patient, we ask ‘do you live in Jefferson County, Whitewater or Cambridge and do you have health insurance?,’” Wallace said. “At that point, we’ll make an appointment with them, because the income piece gets confusing. It’s not something that can just be lickety-split on the phone.”

When new potential patients come in for an initial appointment, they are asked to bring their income tax return and any recent pay stubs.

“Usually when people call, they have a need,” Wallace said. “We don’t want to worry about that complex income piece before they have an appointment because they need to be seen (by a doctor). So our thought is, let’s have them see the doctor and simultaneously determine their ongoing care.”

While the Rock River Free Clinic might not always be the appropriate channel for a patient’s ongoing health care, Wallace said, it is happy to serve as a “safety net (for people in) transitional situations.”

“You find people in these very unique situations that are precipitated from a life event, like they’ve just lost their job and they lost their health insurance with that,” she said. “They’re looking for a new job, but it can be, ‘I’ve got high blood pressure and I’m a truck driver. In order to pass the physical for a truck driving exam, I need to have normal blood pressure, but I can’t afford my medicine.’”

Helping patients get their medication is yet another service provided by the clinic. Through its Patient Prescription Assistance Program, \$235,000 worth of brand-name medications were donated by the drug companies to patients in 2014.

“Our pharmacy expenses last year were drugs that were not covered and for which patients weren’t able to pay,” Wallace said. “We help sometimes in that situation. We had about \$10,000 in expenses from our bottom line (last year).”

The total cost of running the clinic is roughly \$52,000 a year.

“We do need (monetary support) from the community to make (the clinic) sustainable,” Wallace said. “We don’t get any payments from patients. It truly is a free clinic. If a patient does have to pay for anything, it might be if they don’t get on the prescription drug program so they’d have to pay at the pharmacy.”

In addition to the support from Fort HealthCare and the Jefferson County Health Department, current funding and support comes from the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties, Tomorrow’s Hope and the people of Jefferson County.

Wallace said she doesn’t know where the clinic would be if any of its sponsors pulled out.

Volunteers also are critical, and the clinic is looking to grow its volunteer program.

“Our goal really is to get people to the most appropriate place they can receive care,” Wallace said. “To serve those that aren’t able to get healthcare in any other setting. The fact that we know they live in Jefferson County and we know that they don’t have health insurance — those are the people we want to talk to, because we want their future to be the best level of care.”

For more information, visit www.rockriverfreeclinic.org or call (920) 674-7442. To donate or volunteer, contact Wallace at (920) 674-7138 or rrfcdirector@jeffersoncountywi.gov.