

## Rock River Free Clinic growing along with area healthcare needs

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, October 15, 2015 9:27 am

JEFFERSON — In the last few years, the Rock River Free Clinic has undergone a lot of changes, expanding from a one-night-a-week endeavor to being open five days, 36 hours a week, with a paid professional staff.

The organization hired its first executive director, Kristin Wallace, earlier this year, and in the wake of the Affordable Care Act, it has begun connecting qualifying patients to the national insurance exchange or to Wisconsin's BadgerCare.

Wallace spoke to the Jefferson Rotary Club on Wednesday, sharing information about the free clinic, recent changes and the direction the clinic is heading in the future.

A 10-year resident of the Jefferson County area, Wallace has a background in healthcare administration. Before taking the job as the Rock River Free Clinic's first executive director five months ago, she served in various management and administrative roles at Mayo Clinic Scottsdale, then worked for the Women's Connection in the Quad Cities, a women's education and networking membership organization.

Wallace relocated to Fort Atkinson in 2006, when her husband, Mike, was hired as CEO of Fort Healthcare. Since then, she has worked as tourism manager for the Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce and has served as executive director at United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties. In addition, she has been active in numerous community organizations and boards.

She said she is happy to move from the fundraising end of healthcare into an organization that actually provides needed primary care.

The Rock River Free Clinic, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization has set as its mission "to provide access to free health services through health professionals dedicated to caring for low-income and uninsured individuals."

The clinic serves patients 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.

"Seventy percent of our patients have chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension or asthma," Wallace said.

Last year, the clinic served 917 patients in total, 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. Patients come from a variety of backgrounds, with almost half being Caucasian, and about a third Hispanic. Most live in Jefferson or Fort Atkinson, with a smattering from other area towns.

Rock River Free Clinic started in 2003 as a purely volunteer organization, open for very limited hours one night a week.

“Because it was staffed entirely by volunteers, people wouldn’t know what doctor would be there,” Wallace said. “The clinic was open for only three hours a week, and there could be 40 to 50 people in line by noon.”

In 2012, the clinic expanded its hours and moved to having a full-time paid doctor and nursing staff.

“This is not duplicated elsewhere in the state,” Wallace said.

She said the expansion came about as a result of a unique partnership between Fort HealthCare, Jefferson County and the Rock River Free Clinic Board of Directors.

Explaining the reasoning behind the change, she asked, “Do people just get sick on Thursdays?” Prior to the change, many needy Jefferson County area residents wound up in the local emergency room, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay.

“That’s not a good place to get your primary or urgent care needs met,” Wallace said.

Patients who go to the emergency room face a long wait and the influx of cases which could be handled by primary doctors slows down service for everyone, she noted. On the other hand, those who choose not to get their malady checked out right away often see their condition deteriorate, with worse outcomes and at greater cost than if they’d been able to address it when their symptoms first emerged.

Having a five-day-a-week free clinic allows people to be seen sooner and their conditions to be treated before they require additional care. It lessens the pressure on emergency rooms and allows them to get to patients with traditional “emergencies” sooner.

Meanwhile, it lessens the cost all-around. People of little means have access to free or affordable care. Hospitals save money as they don’t have to “write off” charity emergency room care, and the rest of the public doesn’t see its health care costs go up to cover expensive emergency room care for those who can’t pay.

In addition, patients at the free clinic benefit from having a regular primary care doctor, Dr. David Rutledge, who serves as primary care provider and medical director of the clinic.

The free clinic, located in the Jefferson County Health Department Annex in Jefferson, has the same service area as Fort HealthCare — Jefferson County, Whitewater and Cambridge.

The clinic primarily sees people who do not have health insurance. Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act and the establishment of Badger Care, the number of people left uninsured has fallen dramatically, but some do not qualify for the state or national program and others have some degree of insurance but still cannot afford to pay regular rates for medical care.

“In our county alone, about 5,000 people fall through the cracks,” Wallace said.

Rotarian Del Chmielewski spoke up to note that many people with health insurance have high deductibles, perhaps \$10,000 a year, which really only cover hospitalizations and catastrophic care.

“I see that as a next step for the clinic,” Wallace said, addressing the idea of becoming a “charitable clinic” that serves both the uninsured (49 percent) and the underinsured (51 percent).

“We don’t have the infrastructure to bill people right now, but we can get there,” Wallace said. “The mentality of the free clinic is that we want to serve the people who need us — if they’re calling, they probably didn’t just decide to get preventive care. They probably have something going on healthwise.”

The free clinic has just begun arranging for screenings to connect patients to other options, such as BadgerCare or the insurance plans available on the national health insurance exchange.

“We want to be their bridge provider,” Wallace said.

She said that if the clinic can hook people up to more permanent solutions, it will, but other people will wind up with the free clinic as their primary care provider.

“We’ll be starting screenings next week,” Wallace said.

With a large percentage of Rock River Free Clinic patients suffering from some kind of chronic condition, like diabetes, most of them require some type of medication and often cannot afford expensive pharmaceuticals.

Making things more difficult, many of these basic medications to treat conditions like diabetes and asthma have no generic equivalent.

Initially, the Rock River Free Clinic sought to pay for those medications by itself, but that proved too costly to maintain.

Then the clinic started its Patient Prescription Assistance Program, investing in computers, software and a part-time coordinator, who helps individual patients apply for free medications provided directly by the drug companies.

That coordinator, Penny Walsh, helps patients with the paperwork to obtain, free of charge, necessary brand-name medications from pharmaceutical companies.

“Last year alone, we had \$240,000 of prescription medications donated by companies,” Wallace said.

The clinic can’t obtain the medications to prescribe, but they can get the prescriptions for individual patients after the proper application has been filled out.

Receiving those patient prescriptions for which the clinic previously had to pay helped the Rock River Free Clinic turn its economic situation around, resulting in a first-time net income of \$32,656.

The board decided to use that money to invest in an executive director, and several months later, Wallace signed on to take that position. One major goal Wallace has for the clinic in the near future is to assist people in signing up for health insurance coverage through the national “marketplace” set up through the Affordable Care Act.

The next open enrollment period starts Nov. 1 and runs through Jan. 31. People who do not sign up during that window miss their chance.

Wallace asked the businesspeople in the Rotary Club to spread the word, especially to people who would be leaving their companies and might otherwise be signing up for super-costly Cobra coverage.

One more area in which the free clinic is reaching out is behavioral health. The clinic has received a grant from Tomorrow’s Hope to help identify people who need counseling and to hook them up with needed psychological care.

“We are going to put together some initial screenings for Dr. Rutledge to use,” Wallace said.

The idea of integrated healthcare (addressing both body and mind together) is spreading throughout the country, and Fort HealthCare too is expanding in that area, adding an on-site psychologist.

The Rock River Free Clinic has received critical support from the Jefferson and Fort Atkinson Foundations, the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties and Tomorrow’s Hope. Its main sources of income are donations and grants.

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.

The clinic, located at 1541 Annex Road in the Jefferson County Health Department's lower-level clinic area, 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.

The clinic always welcomes tax-deductible donations. People may visit [www.rockriverfreeclinic.com](http://www.rockriverfreeclinic.com) for information.

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

With other questions, people are welcome to contact Wallace at [RRFCDirector@jeffersoncountywi.gov](mailto:RRFCDirector@jeffersoncountywi.gov) or call the free clinic at (920) 674-7442.