

# Unite and Join Forces! Free Clinics, Advocacy and Public Policy

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Remarks by Mark R. Cruise

Thank you, Russ, for that kind introduction. It's been a pleasure meeting old friends and getting to know many of you for the first time over the past several days. The Georgia Free Clinic Network continues to make great strides, because number one you have an outstanding executive director in Donna Looper backed by a very supportive Board of Directors and Board of Advisors and number two because each of you are growing and developing effective clinics in your communities. And you just can't sustain a strong state association unless both of those things are happening, and so it really is a partnership. You're in this together folks. And when it comes to advocacy and public policy, that is so important.

I appreciate the opportunity to share a few remarks this morning. The title that Donna gave us for this session says it so well, "Unite and Join Forces!" That may sound like a worn-out cliché, but when we're able to lay aside our own particular clinic agendas for a moment in order to come together and work for the greater good of all clinics in Georgia, especially in the public policy sphere, we can accomplish so much more than if each clinic acted alone and isolated from one another. And so not only the strength in numbers, but the shared agenda – singing from the same sheet of music – can make all the difference in the world.

As I lead off the session this morning, I want to make three points in laying out the case for why you and me as Free Clinic people should want to be advocates with policymakers. Then Lasa is going to share with you some of the tips, techniques, and tactics for effective advocacy.

The first thing I want to say is no one is better positioned to be an advocate for the uninsured than Free Clinics. No one knows the crisis of uninsurance, and its effects societally, communally, or personally - better than Free Clinics. You see this problem

coming through your doors every time you open your clinic. You look in the face of the uninsured every day, and you see the pain, the hardship, and the struggle, not to mention the adverse health effects that being uninsured has helped create. No one knows and understands this problem better than you. And it so happens that you are operating one of the better and more efficient and effective solutions to this problem that is out there. Certainly not the only one but an important one. The question is why shouldn't you be advocating on your own behalf and on behalf of those you serve, when you have such a great answer to this daunting problem.

Donna has prepared some excellent talking points for how you can make your case. But you can't leave this all up to the Georgia Free Clinic Network to take care of. You've got to carry some water on this too. If legislators know that the Uninsured Work Group has come forth with the recommendation for the \$2 million appropriation for Free Clinics and they don't hear from their own Free Clinic folks back home, what kind of message does that send? That would be a mixed message, one you would want to avoid.

The second message I want to share with you is there may not be a better time than now for Free Clinics to be advocating with policymakers. Everyone is talking about health care, and this sort of goes in cycles, you know, and we have to be ready to speak up and be heard when the interest level gets as high as it is now. I began my work with Free Clinics in the early 1990s when there was a huge health care debate going on in this country. And then when the Clinton health care plan was not embraced, we went through a long period where no one wanted to talk about health care at all. We just got tired of it. Now, just in the last 2-3 years, we've seen the national conversation about health care start up again. And with the presidential campaigns in high gear, with the candidates talking about how they're going to solve the nation's health care crisis, we once again have a platform and a forum to be a part of the national discourse.

In so many states across the country, there are policy discussions taking place that are focused around strengthening and in some cases re-organizing access to health care and care for the uninsured. Many states have taken up the mantle of health care reform

and are acting boldly to re-direct resources and experiment with new strategies in tackling this crisis. And if we Free Clinics do not see our way through to joining these reform discussions and having our voices be heard, we stand to not only miss an opportunity to achieve real gains in public policy support for Free Clinics; we may even find ourselves on the short end of the stick, having lost valuable ground that we may never be able to regain.

Here in Georgia you have an historic opportunity, a very real chance to make your voices heard and receive the support and confidence of Georgia policymakers by means of a line item appropriation. This is your shot. It may be the best shot you'll have in a very long time, and it may not come around again soon. I encourage you to get out there and make the most of it.

So, we've said that no one is better positioned than you to advocate for the uninsured. And we've gone on to say that there is no better time than now to be joining forces and advocating for Georgia's Free Clinics.

You can do this, people! Turn to your neighbor and say, "We can do this." The third and final message I want to share with you is that all of this can work and produce results that are very beneficial. In state after state, Free Clinics working in concert with one another and with their state Free Clinic Associations have achieved public policy successes that have delivered real and lasting benefits.

I just came here from a meeting of Free Clinics in Oklahoma where they have recently come together to get legislation enacted that provides sovereign immunity for Free Clinic volunteers (something you are already familiar with) as well as legislation that allows retired health professionals that volunteer in Free Clinics to maintain their licensure for free and not have to meet any continuing education requirements. These may not sound like such a big deal to you, but in Oklahoma they're tickled to death. The Oklahoma free and charitable clinics have found their sea legs as advocates and are making great strides.

Getting favorable laws passed to make things easier or less cumbersome for Free Clinics and their volunteers is one thing. Getting line item appropriations is another.

In Virginia, Free Clinics have successfully lobbied for \$1.5 million a year in state support. Now, because of the positive results that have come of that state investment since 2000, the current Governor has recommended adding another \$1.7 million per year.

In West Virginia, the Free Clinics there, which number only 10 in the entire state, receive \$2,750,000 each year for their clinic operations.

In Ohio, Free Clinics have successfully tapped into the state's share of the Master Tobacco Settlement and receive hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.

In North Carolina, Free Clinics have been able on several different occasions to participate in distributions of legal settlements that their state Attorney General has secured in settling lawsuits with various health care concerns.

Time doesn't permit to go through every state and tick off for you the legislative and regulatory and appropriations successes of Free Clinics, but suffice to say, you are in good company with Free Clinics around the country as you lobby for your appropriation here in Georgia.

This can work, my friends. Don't be afraid. Be respectful with the policymakers you talk to, but don't be bashful. You have a great cause to advocate for. You deliver a valuable service that saves Georgia taxpayers tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Be proud of what you do, and don't think for a moment that you don't deserve consideration for even this little bit of support from your state government. Even at \$2 million, that will represent just a fraction of the total funds you have to raise each year. State government can and should be a financial partner in supporting your work. It is altogether right and good and timely that you make this ask. By acting collectively, your voice will be that much stronger.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you. I wish you all the best as you unite and join forces as Free Clinic advocates.