

Clinic for uninsured expanding program

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Joan Kelly is no stranger to chronic health problems. Nor to surgeries, having undergone 67 in her 64 years. Add that to a lack of medical insurance coupled with low income, and she has issues.

In January, she arrived at the **Community Health Mission** on Eisenhower Drive after learning of the program from a church member.

There she found the motivation and support for changes she needed. "My goal is to live a little while longer," said the great-grandmother who suffers from diabetes.

She has at least one thing in common with others who used the mission almost 15,000 times last year - they are low-income and uninsured, said Dr. Ana Maria Viseras, health promotion and wellness-program coordinator at the mission.

The mission offers free or reduced medications, primary medical care and an education program to those struggling with medical problems but without medical coverage. It is part of the Chatham County Safety Net program, a group of community volunteer care providers targeting nearly 6,000 uninsured and low-income residents here. It recently was cited by the Healthcare Georgia Foundation as a model program for filling gaps in health care and assisting individuals and families regardless of their ability to pay.

A part-time bus driver with First Student, Kelly makes about \$12.50 an hour, but with limited hours. Her husband dropped his major medical coverage when he turned 75, leaving her to cope with her medical conditions. A native of Venezuela, Viseras focuses on dealing with chronic illnesses and helping her clients deal with them. Kelly is typical of those using the mission, Viseras said. To assist, Viseras is teaming with the YMCA on Habersham Street to educate patients with diabetes. She will teach her clients and those from the Y an hour each Wednesday beginning July 16. In return, her clients will be allowed to use the YMCA's facilities for free. "This is completely free," she said. "This is part of our clinic program."

Kelly welcomes the challenge. "I'm active, but I'm just not motivated," the native New Yorker said. She arrived at the mission in January, toting a bag full of prescriptions and a pack-a-day smoking habit. "They straightened me out," Kelly said.

Staff reduced her scripts to six, which she can fill free or at Wal-mart for \$4 a month. Viseras got Kelly to kick the cigarettes through a combination of the drug Wellbutrin, support and a promise to "kill" her if she did not stop. "I knew it was time for me to get rid of the habit," Kelly said. Now Kelly hopes to shed weight. She'd like to get from 215 pounds to 160. She hopes the Y program will help her. "I need somebody to help with me," Kelly said. "If I can get down to my weight, I can shake off the diabetes."

WITH NO NATIONAL SOLUTIONS IN SIGHT, CHATHAM COUNTY TAKES ON THE HEALTH CARE CRISIS AT HOME

Healthcare Georgia Foundation Grant Highlights Strategies for Filling Gaps in Care

***(From HGF press release)* An innovative new program in Chatham County, Ga. is finding traction in one of the most pervasive health care crises around: the use of emergency rooms as primary care providers to patients without adequate health insurance. By drawing on community resources more effectively, Chatham County has been able to provide health care services to its uninsured and underinsured populations at a fraction of the cost of primary care delivered in an emergency room. Healthcare Georgia Foundation released today, *A Case for Health: Community Health Mission*, a case study highlighting the strengths and successes of the health “safety net” structure that has been developed to serve low income individuals and families in Chatham County, Ga., regardless of their ability to pay for health care services.**

Healthcare Georgia Foundation commissioned a case study to highlight the work of Chatham County’s Safety Net Planning Council, focusing on the positive results that this model of care brings to residents through the work of Community Health Mission, a local clinic and active Council member. The case study highlights necessary components of a safety net structure as well as challenges to consider when using the model.

“The story of **Community Health Mission** and the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council demonstrates how leadership at the individual, organizational and community level can make a tangible difference in the lives of people in need of care,” said Dr. Gary Nelson, Healthcare Georgia Foundation president.

Chatham County’s success lies in its creation of a multi-disciplinary “safety net” including local hospitals, community and nonprofit organizations, and social service agencies that work together to provide support for low income and uninsured residents. Some key attributes of the safety net include the following:

Volunteer Networks and Partnerships. Community Health Mission provides free health care services to nearly 6,000 uninsured and low income residents in the Savannah area.

Understanding the importance of collaboration in providing care to people, the clinic not only utilizes a network of more than 100 volunteers – including physicians and other health care professionals – to provide care, but it relies on other members of the Safety Net Council to fill gaps in services. Partnerships developed with local hospitals have led to equipment and service donations, such as mammogram and cancer screenings, as well as strong relationships with specialty care providers, enabling patients to get the care they need at a fraction of the cost. The average cost of care at Community Health Mission is \$50 for a primary care visit compared to \$260 for a primary care visit in a Chatham County hospital emergency room.

Prevention Emphasis. Through its wellness program, Community Health Mission educates patients on basic chronic disease prevention including diabetes management and smoking cessation. In 2007, more than 400 patients participated in disease prevention wellness programs; more than 1,100 breast and cervical cancer screenings were conducted; and exercise levels and vegetable consumption increased among diabetes management program participants.

Results Measurement. To measure progress, the Council implemented uniform metrics that each safety net member reports against. Members like Community Health Mission can see the true difference they are making individually as well as collectively as part of the Council. Results can be used to strengthen the safety net as members seek support and funding, both individually and collaboratively, as well as to improve programs and processes among Council members. “It is critical to have the support of local government to have a successful safety net,” said Dr. Diane Weems, chair of the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council and chief medical officer for the Chatham County Public Health Department. “In addition, you need to bring key players to the table and work together to advance the health of people; productive collaboration strengthens individual member organizations by providing additional resources and outlets for providing care.”

For Community Health Mission, the success of the safety net structure can be seen in the lives of patients. “Being part of the Safety Net Council gives us resources to provide our patients with comprehensive primary and specialty care,” said Dr. Miriam Rittmeyer, executive director of **Community Health Mission**. “Our goal is to not only provide them with quality care, but to treat each and every patient with respect, and to provide services in a safe, welcoming environment where they know they can have a medical home.”