

Free clinic to enlarge mission

Lithonia center needs help to afford move to bigger site

By April Hunt

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In a cramped granite cottage just down the street from where Lithonia's downtown limps along, Renee Ranson changes lives.

"It's people working who don't have health insurance, and more people who are losing their jobs," Ranson said of the patients who come to the **South DeKalb Center for Healthy Living**.

The clinic — little more than two exam booths, a donated desk and small waiting area squeezed into about 800 square feet — gave free medical care to 1,500 people in its first year, which ended in April. As administrator, Ranson oversaw daily operations of the place known simply as "the center."

The free clinic, a rarity in metro Atlanta, operates in Lithonia, a city of 2,300 where one in four people live below the poverty line. For patients who can't afford the sliding-scale clinics run by county health departments or other charities, it offers primary care clinics two Saturdays a month.

Two doctors donate their time at those events, though often other doctors also show up to help. They offer everything from check-ups to basic blood work and the occasional referral to a specialist. Any resident of DeKalb County who is poor or without insurance can get care at the clinic, which runs on donations from individuals and companies such as Kaiser Permanente.

The center sets aside one Wednesday a month for anyone to come in for a basic health screening. On another Wednesday, a hypertension clinic teaches those with high blood pressure how to adjust their diet and lifestyles to help prolong their lives.

But the center is small. On a recent Saturday, like so many before it, Ranson had to tell would-be patients that they weren't among the first 30 to arrive and couldn't get in for help.

"They're just trying to live, and it takes them time, because they don't want to ask for a handout," Ranson said with a sad shake of her head.

She is eyeing a move into a nearby home that is large enough to add another exam room, maybe even two.

First St. Paul AME Church owns the home, as it does the cottage where the clinic is housed now. The Rev. Marvin Crawford's congregation is offering the new space rent-free if the clinic renovates the now-empty shell of a house.

The price tag will be at least \$10,000 — or a fifth of the annual budget of the clinic. Ranson was thrilled to start raising the needed money with a yard sale that was part of the center's first birthday party late last month.

She made \$300.

Now Alex Giovanni has signed on to help. Giovanni is an Alpharetta businesswoman who met Ranson through a friend. She is approaching business contacts about donating money and materials. The goal is to have the donations in and the work done so the clinic can move by year's end.

"Hearing Renee's passion, seeing people who really need the help, it touches my heart," Giovanni said. "I know that people will want to do something about that need."

The need is real. Just ask Steven Wilson.

"This clinic, not being overly dramatic, it saved my life," Wilson said. Wilson, 60, lost health insurance when he was laid off a year ago. He found new work as a night security supervisor, but without benefits. He figured his sudden fatigue was due to the stress of the situation.

Exhausted, he stopped into the clinic one Saturday after working all night. His blood pressure was 190/110. The single dad to two teens was at great risk for a heart attack or stroke. Doctors immediately put him on medication and enrolled him in the hypertension clinic. Wilson learned how to cook healthier foods and was given tips on getting more exercise.

The clinic also paired him with a specialist who saw him pro bono, getting him on the right medicine to help get his blood pressure down.

These days, Wilson's blood pressure is back down to normal range. His family has adopted his new habits too, making them all healthier.

"Because they were there for me, I am more healthy and less liable to need critical care at the emergency room," Wilson said. "So even as small as the place is, the amount of people the center has helped is tremendous."