

## Help pours in for health clinic for needy

By April Hunt

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Renee Ranson watched the elderly woman slowly make her way through the parking lot of the **South DeKalb Center for Healthy Living**. The woman was on her way to the store, but had read about the free clinic's long-shot bid to expand services.

"She gave me a crumpled dollar bill and said, 'That's all I can afford now, honey, but when I get more, I will be back,' " recalls Ranson, the clinic administrator. The old woman walked back into the Georgia heat without revealing her name.

The dollar bill is framed now, a symbol of the generosity visited on the clinic that helped more than 1,500 people in its first year in 2007, all from a cramped granite cottage behind a funeral home in Lithonia. For clients, the clinic is known as simply "the center."

In about seven weeks, following an article in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in May, donors large and small have given more than \$100,000 to Ranson's dream of renovating a house as quarters for the clinic, allowing it to serve twice as many needy residents.

The generosity also means the larger clinic — with four doctor's stations and a small lab — should be ready by year's end.

"The clients she serves need to feel safe and welcomed for care," said Evonne Yancey, a spokeswoman for the Kaiser Foundation of Georgia, the nonprofit arm of Kaiser Permanente.

The foundation recently awarded the clinic \$75,000 toward the renovation and also sent its efficiency expert to Lithonia to help plan the space. It is the first gift of 2008 for the foundation, which handed out \$1.2 million last year to 28 different "safety net" centers, including Grady Memorial Hospital.

A 2006 study from the Health Policy Center at Georgia State showed that metro Atlanta does not have enough facilities to meet the needs of the uninsured. Places like the Lithonia clinic are rare, offering not just help during emergencies but also primary and preventive care.

"This is an example of helping where it's most needed," said Craig Fishel, spokesman for Home Depot. The Atlanta-based company awarded \$7,000 in materials to the clinic as part of its community-charity effort. "We are happy to help that happen."

Others were just as ready to help, with major donations arriving from Friedman Supporting Foundation of the Atlanta Jewish Federation and the state of Georgia. DeKalb Medical Center's Hillendale location has offered its lab to handle routine blood work. That alone will save the clinic almost half its \$50,000 operating budget. Personal checks have also poured in. On her first trip to the mailbox after the AJC article appeared, Ranson found it overflowing with donations that added up to \$2,500.

"I cried for the longest time," Ranson said. "It still brings tears to my eyes to know people realize we are our brothers' keeper."

All the donations mean Ranson can move forward with expanding the clinic. Renovation has begun on the new site, a vacant home on Klondike Road. First St. Paul AME Church owns the house but has given Ranson a 10-year lease for free.

The old woman's framed dollar bill will hang on the new clinic's walls as soon as it opens. In the meantime, Ranson is wrangling 42 new volunteers, people who can donate time as doctors or plant and tend a clinic garden.

"I still want to keep it humble, and make it a clinic for the people who need it," Ranson said.

"You don't need to dress up blessings like that."