

Commentary: Volunteer physicians, dentists needed to meet demand

By Carl Westman, board chairman, and Wayne Mullican, board vice chairman, Senior Friendship Health Center Naples 4:46 p.m. EST November 11, 2016



(Photo: Provided)

Naples is a community blessed with superb doctors, health care professionals and facilities. Those fortunate enough to afford quality medical care have many choices to stay healthy and fit as they age.

But for many others – yes, even in our affluent community – those services are out of reach. These are individuals without health insurance who fly below the radar, invisible but very much in need.

According to the Community Foundation of Collier County, adults who could not see a doctor due to cost increased 17 percent in 2015. Twenty percent of seniors ages 55 to 64 have no insurance coverage.

Fortunately, there is a place for them to go: the Senior Friendship Health Center, which has been providing much-needed care to low-income, mostly uninsured older adults since 1985. Patients are accepted and eligibility is determined by financial need, regardless of employment status.

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We have flexible payment plans to ensure patients receive care when they need it, regardless of their ability to pay.

In 2016, the Senior Friendship Health Center teamed up with the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida and moved to a shared site in East Naples, at 2355 Stanford Court, Unit 701.



Wayne Mullican Board vice chairman Senior Friendship Health Center (Photo: Provided)

This collaboration was designed to make best use of limited funds and to provide patients with an improved continuum of care, from primary care geriatrics to specialty care. We serve patients in a traditional ambulatory multispecialty center.

Our services encompass primary care, medical specialty, comprehensive dental services, medication assistance and community education.

The leading health issues we deal with are diabetes, hypertension, COPD, various forms of arthritis and obesity.

Many patients are affected by multiple unmanaged chronic diseases.

Nearly all of our patients feel they have limited options due to financial hardship, which drives them to the emergency room for nonemergency conditions – visits that could have been prevented with regular health maintenance and education.

Many of our patients arrive in crisis. Our role is to stabilize, educate and provide regular follow-up to improve their health status. Each year, during nearly 3,000 patient visits, lives are changed and hope is restored for adults 50 and older in Collier County.

The Senior Friendship Health Center is different than other community clinics in that it is volunteer-based. Our clinic's ability to take care of underserved patients depends entirely on the goodwill of a dedicated group of volunteer doctors, dentists and support staff -- committed practitioners like Dr. Edward Banaszak, who has served as a volunteer physician since 2003 and was one of our original board members in Collier County. We recently asked him why he gives of his time.

"I'm here because I like taking care of people and these people need our help," Banaszak remarked. "It's very gratifying to see individuals who might have otherwise gone to the emergency room -- or not sought any help at all -- if the Senior Friendship Health Center didn't exist."

The dedication of our medical and dental professionals, as well as volunteer clinical and clerical support, is truly inspiring.

Looking ahead, demand is growing and we anticipate the need for services will increase in 2017.

As a result, the health center will need more dentists and specialists in fields such as cardiology, pulmonary diseases, gynecology, ophthalmology and dermatology.

If you are a retired or semi-retired medical professional, we urge you to consider joining our multidisciplinary team of volunteers a few hours a week. Your volunteer service will give meaning to the lives of those you help and bring you a deep sense of personal satisfaction.

Let's work together to improve the health of Collier residents to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, high-quality care!

To volunteer or inquire about services, please call M J Scarpelli at 239-658-3105.

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