

Clinic needs a major shot of the right medicine

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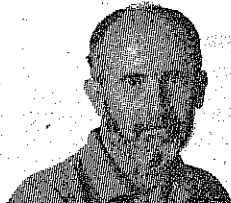
The woman is a patient at Hope Clinic/Clinic Esperanza. So is the woman who was operating a stapling machine in a jewelry factory and drove a staple through her finger. And the landscaper with a skin infection who initially treated the condition by coating it with the contents of some pills a friend gave him.

"The clinic is for people who have been hard-working members of the community and because of the economy have fallen on hard times," says De Groot. "We're here to catch them."

She presides in this amazing place behind The Cuban Revolution on Valley Street in Providence. It was started five years ago by a group that included De Groot and others who had left the Rhode Island Free Clinic over differences with the way it was being run.

Its first home was in the basement of The Open Table of Christ on Broad Street, which has become a crossroads for those dealing most directly with the fallout from hard times. De Groot remembers doing health screenings in the church's boiler room.

Now, the clinic is in a converted mill building where there is room to move. The waiting room, where patients wait on rows of wooden



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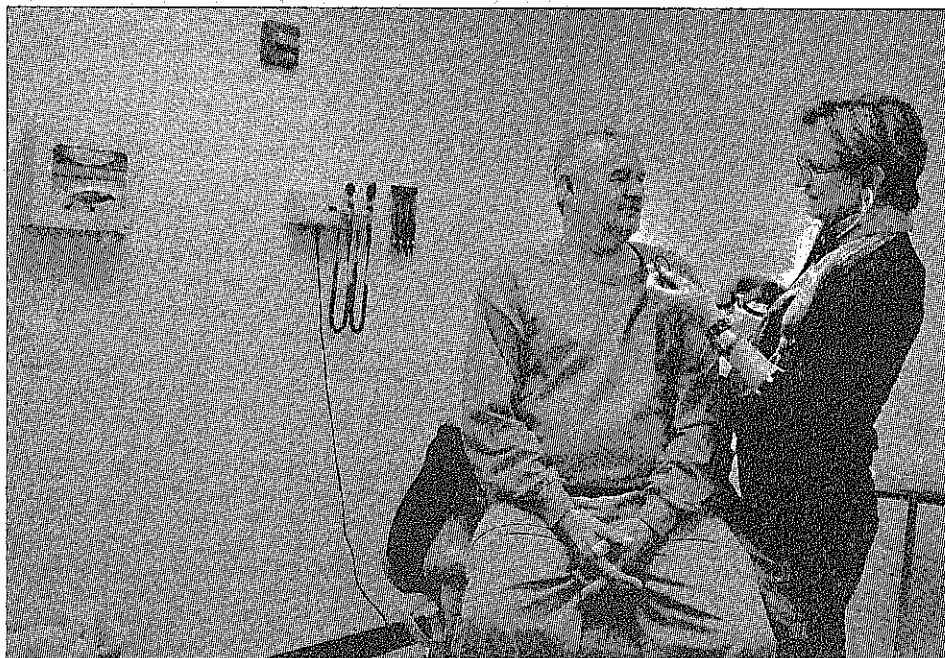
chairs, is sometimes used for exercise classes.

There are 660 people on the patient list, many of whom would not receive health care if not for the free clinic. Some would stay home, as they have before, and take an aspirin for pains that could be symptoms of all kinds of things. Some would pay for treatment out of pocket and thus not pay for food or perhaps rent. And some would go to an emergency room.

The fact that Hope Clinic/Clinic Esperanza is on life support itself and in danger of closing in the middle of next month, is a sign of a growing problem for many nonprofits that do good and vital work on the most basic level. Funding sources are either drying up or cutting back. Services are being reduced. The caring, common-sense approach to community problems is getting squeezed by the hard, cold statistics of a stumbling economy.

At times, De Groot and some of her board members have reached into their own pockets to cover immediate expenses, but the clinic needs help in much bigger ways or it will close its doors.

Before that is allowed to happen, people who could make a difference should visit. They should see the medical students and the volunteer



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / KRIS CRAIG

Dr. Anne De Groot, volunteer medical director at a free medical clinic in Providence, with patient Juan Vargas. The clinic serves about 660 patients who do not have health insurance.

doctors and nurses who come, because there is no experience quite like it anywhere else.

They should definitely meet the "Navegantes." They are, says De Groot, "the rocks on which we stand."

The Navegantes see it all and they see it first. They see the high blood pressure, the high blood sugar, the evidence of domestic violence, the fear that comes with being sick and poor. Every week, they go to the Open Table of Christ during the weekly food distribution and provide health information. They are bilingual. They understand the language and the culture, and they educate patients about the good and the bad. If

necessary, they guide them to the people they need to see at the clinic. Beyond that, they know how to work through the often tricky process that allows the uninsured to get free services at hospitals.

"With domestic violence, sometimes it has been going on for a long, long time and they are scared," says Luz Betancur, one of the Navegantes. "I'll say to a woman, 'It's OK, I can find people to help you.'"

There are support groups she relies on. One woman, says Betancur, left her abuser and is living on her own.

"I can get through to them," she says.

That's what happens. People get through. The clinic is

in many ways a clinic in bringing people in from the unhealthy and often dangerous territory marked by language barriers, poverty and fear. One thing that is not asked of the people coming through the door is their immigration status.

On Thursday night, Ana Vargas, who worked in a jewelry factory until it closed, waited for her appointment, along with her husband, Juan. She has painful problems with her spine. He has high blood pressure. Both were seen by a doctor.

Ana Vargas says she first met De Groot at the Open Table of Christ and that brought her to the clinic.

"Dr. Annie, she gave me a gift," says Ana. "Thank God

for Dr. Annie."

Vargas has signed up to be a clinic volunteer. Anything she can do for Clinic Esperanza she will do, she says.

De Groot has her own practice, teaches, does research and owns her own business. She says one of the great joys of running the clinic has been finding the large number of specialists all over the state who are willing to provide for free the kind of treatment for clinic patients that would otherwise be out of reach.

"We can leverage this altruism," she says.

But money is also needed. It costs about \$20,000 a month to run the clinic. It seems a small amount to help hundreds of people enjoy healthier lives.

Not to mention the rich returns in simple human understanding.

"I love it here," says Gina Chen. "It's easy to get out of touch when we're at school."

She is one of the volunteer medical students De Groot talks about, the ones who learn early about the woman from Woonsocket and her hard trip to work.

Chen is in her first year of medical school at Brown, where she also earned her undergraduate degree. She comes to the clinic twice a month. She and other students do intake — take vital signs, do preliminary examinations. And one night a month there is a student clinic where they see patients under the watchful eye of a doctor.

"It makes it a lot more real," she says.

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SCHOOLS Leaders, money needed

Continued from A1

Providence Journal, found numerous roadblocks with the \$3-billion program, including an inability to gauge its success in its first two years. (See story below.)

Without enough skilled leaders and resources, Rhode Island education officials need to improve its most troubled schools will be much harder. But, says state Education Commissioner Deborah A. Cist, the state needs to push ahead anyway.

"Both challenges remain," Cist says. "Those absolute are things we are dealing with right now.... But this isn't just about resources. Resources are helpful, but we need to tackle this work no matter what."

This spring, the state Department of Education will use a portion of the \$75 million drawn from the national Race to the Top grant to train a dozen educators to become "turn-around" specialists.

"It's important that we develop that expertise locally," Cist says.

The high schools identified

in Rhode Island have high dropout rates and have consistently performed poorly on state standardized tests, particularly in math. Elementary and middle schools targeted for improvement also have a history of low test scores and have failed to help students improve. All serve large numbers of low-income children and have languished among the bottom tier of schools for years.

The 13 schools have been required to adopt one of four federally mandated methods to improve: close, turn over operation to a charter management organization or a labor-management collaboration; choose a "turnaround" model that requires removal of the school's principal and half of the teaching staff; or choose the "transformation" model that requires, among other changes, a longer school day and additional teacher training.

Teachers among leaders remain troubled about the upheaval school-improvement efforts can cause, and skeptical about the four federal approaches.

They are also worried that without enough money, ambitious improvement plans are destined to fail.

"No one is arguing that we need to do everything we can to improve education in these schools," said Frank Flynn, president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and School Professionals, which represents teachers in the districts with schools involved in the federal program: Central Falls Elementary, Dr. Jorge Alvarez High, Gilbert Stuart Middle, Mount Pleasant High, Pleasant View Elementary, all in Providence.

The second group of schools cannot receive federal funds until their improvement plans are approved by the state.

Third group of schools may be identified in May; it's unclear how much federal SIG money will be available.

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Central Falls High School, one of the first schools in the county identified for SIG funds, is a source of both hope and caution.

It embarked in September 2010 with three goals: improve its graduation rate; improve school climate; and improve the dismal math performance on the state standardized test.

The school experienced a rocky first year. Teacher morale and attendance were so low, more than half of the students did not receive a grade in at least one class in the first quarter because they had received inadequate instruction due to excessive teacher absences.

Roughly half the teachers at the high school have left in the past two years, and much of the teaching staff is new.

This year, teachers, parents, students and officials agree the atmosphere and communication have vastly improved.

KEY POINTS SIG schools in R.I.

First five R.I. schools identified in 2010 can apply for \$11 million over three years: Central Falls High and, in Providence, B. Jae Clanton Complex, Juanita Sanchez Complex, Lillian Feinstein Elementary at Sackett Street and Roger Williams Middle.

Grants given to date: Central Falls High, \$13 million in fiscal 2011 and \$12.5 million in year 2012; Providence schools, \$3.9 million in fiscal 2012.

Second group of eight schools identified in 2011 can apply for \$5.4 million over three years: Shea and Tolman high schools in Pawtucket; state-operated School for the Deaf; and Carl G. Lauer Elementary, Dr. Jorge Alvarez High, Gilbert Stuart Middle, Mount Pleasant High, Pleasant View Elementary, all in Providence.

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EDUCATION

Two years into federal grant program, grades aren't in

By ALYSSON KLEIN EDUCATION WRITER

After two years, the federal program providing billions of dollars to help states and districts close or remake some of their worst-performing schools remains an ambitious work in progress, with roughly 1,200 turnaround schools under way, but still no verdict on the program's effectiveness.

The School Improvement Grant program, authorized by a \$5-billion windfall under the federal economic-stimulus program in 2009, has jump-started aggressive moves by states and districts. To get their share of the money, they had to quickly identify some of their most academically troubled schools, craft new teacher-evaluation systems, and carve out more time for instruction.

Some schools and districts spent millions of dollars on outside experts and consultants. Others went through the politically ticklish process of replacing teachers and

principals, while combating community skepticism and meeting the demands of district and state overseers.

It's not at all clear if the federal prescription can cure the most ailing schools and lead to long-term improvements, but preliminary student data for the program offer some promise. The U.S. Department of Education looked at about 700 of the schools in the first year of the program and found that a quarter of them posted double-digit gains in math during the 2010-11 school year. Another 20 percent showed similar progress in reading.

A collaborative reporting project drawing on the efforts of more than 20 news organizations and affiliated journalists paints a mixed picture of how the SIG program is playing out on the ground. The major findings show:

■ States have pulled SIG money from at least a dozen schools that showed anemic progress on early indicators of

success, such as teacher and student attendance, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

■ Schools nationwide, especially those in rural areas, are wrestling with staff turnover and the need for new teacher-evaluation systems driven by the program's requirements, along with the challenge of adding extra instructional time.

■ Although millions of dollars in grant money has gone to outside contractors, few states track the details of how that money is being spent—and some contractor-run schools have seen student performance sink.

■ At the same time, the program's supporters can point to encouraging—though early—developments. And some of the best early reviews come from students, who say their schools are calmer and more academically rigorous.

■ There's evidence on both sides of the coin," said Robert Balfanz, the director of the Ev-

erone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and a leading researcher on school improvement. "The big question is whether those changes are going to lead to improvement."

From the get-go, the program has been reviled on Capitol Hill as Exhibit A for those arguing against federal overreach in K-12 education. The program's financing remains in jeopardy, and it is almost certain to get an extreme makeover—one proposal before the House of Representatives would scrap it entirely.

Still, a survey by the Council of the Great City Schools found that a majority of urban school district officials think the program has the potential to deliver lasting change to long-founding schools.

Personal issues also have posed a challenge. Even the most flexible of the four federal models—"transformation," the one chosen by nearly three-quarters of participating schools—requires dis-

tricts to devise teacher-evaluation systems that take student performance into account, which has led to bruising battles in states such as New York.

And among a number of models, districts and schools have struggled to replace long-tenured teachers and principals. More than half of participating large urban districts said they didn't have enough time to hire qualified staff, according to the urban schools group survey. Even some contractors that offer services to SIG schools have raised alarm bells about the lack of accountability for outside groups.

Despite the challenges, local officials already worry about what will happen if SIG dollars disappear.

Said Lionel Jackson, Jr., the principal of Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts High, in Baltimore: "The important question is if this all goes away, can we keep up the momentum?"

