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Clinica Esperanza: Hope and care for those who can't afford insurance

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PROVIDENCE — A busy weekday evening is getting underway at Clinica Esperanza as doctors and medical students welcome their first patients and as staff prepare to lead another in a series of *Vida Sana*, or Healthy Living, classes on nutrition and exercise.

All of which will be followed by a zumba workout.

And all of which is free.

So what is *Clinica Esperanza* and how does it do what it does?

Translated from Spanish, *Clinica Esperanza* means Hope Clinic, which is exactly what it aims to offer uninsured immigrants who might otherwise have no hope of getting health care and advice, especially from a bilingual staff.

On this Tuesday evening, a handful of Latino patients arrive at the urban clinic in a revitalized mill complex on Valley Street near Atwells Avenue. Having made appointments, they will be seen by Brown University medical students supervised by Brown faculty physicians — all volunteers.

"We wanted to help people who spoke English as a second language, first-generation immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, South America and Central America," says Dr. Annie De Groot, who in 2007 founded the clinic and continues to serve as its volunteer medical director. "The focus is linguistically appropriate and culturally sensitive health care."

De Groot, who makes a living as CEO of the Providence vaccine research firm EpiVax and as a professor at the University of Rhode Island, has traveled overseas extensively to provide medical care to the needy.

"It's something I've done my whole life," she says, "but it's so nice to be able to practice this kind of medicine at home."

With so many people having obtained health coverage through the Affordable Care Act, the clinic's mission is to serve those who can't afford health insurance yet don't qualify for Medicaid or federal premium tax credits at HealthSource RI. That typically includes immigrants, many of them undocumented and not yet eligible for government-supported coverage.

"These are hard working people. These are not drinking and drugging people," she says.

Despite that, 80 percent make less than \$15,000 a year, she says. The clinic plays a vital role in keeping uninsured minorities healthy so they don't wind up needing to seek costly care from medical centers. That can spare them from spending money better saved for "taking care of their families" and from leaving hospitals stuck with unpaid bills.

Clinica Esperanza offers a variety of services. Twice a month the Medical Student Clinic is held by Brown, with staff nurses and *navigantes* (navigators) to offer assistance. The screenings conducted in the community are also done in partnership with Brown's medical school.

Clinica Esperanza also offers the CHEER Clinic, a walk-in clinic, intended to divert patients from going to a hospital emergency room. It's open weekdays from 2 to 7 p.m. A registered nurse is available to see patients and a licensed physician is on call.

Vida Sana addresses immigrants health literacy by having them meet in small groups for five weekly two-hour sessions to learn how to lose weight, eat healthy foods and manage blood pressure and diabetes.

"For most of our patients, English is not their first language, and as a result, they lack the skills necessary to manage these conditions such as understanding food labels, monitoring blood glucose and calculating insulin doses," according to a description of the course.

When first founded, the clinic worked out of a basement of a Methodist church on Broadway.

"I saw patients in the boiler room," says De Groot.

It moved into its new quarters, with donated equipment, in 2010.

De Groot says the clinic sees about 2,000 to 2,500 patients a year and estimates that it has saved them from nearly \$600,000 in out-of-pocket costs had they gone to the emergency room.



PHOTO/ THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/BOB THAYER
Annie De Groot is the medical director at Clinica Esperanza.

Without payments from insurers, the clinic's \$280,000 annual budget depends on grants and volunteers, including the doctors and medical students who give their time to examine patients. Financial support has come from the state Health Department, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of RI, the United Way, Rhode Island Foundation and American Communities Trust.

Still, says De Groot, "It's a struggle."

But as a descendant of immigrants herself, "Why shouldn't we give this next generation a chance?" she asks. "Don't you want people healthy and working and contributing to society?"

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