



It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Neighborhood Health Clinic expands to meet the needs of a growing patient base

Who hasn't spent an evening with friends pontificating on the world's problems? From political maneuvering to football coaching, we envision smarter, more efficient solutions and believe we can do better. And then we do nothing. Daily lives are demanding, and we all know about best-laid plans and good intentions.

But what if we, as armchair quarterbacks, moved beyond the talk to implement meaningful change?

The Neighborhood Health Clinic is the result of creative brainstorming and swift

follow-through. Twenty years ago, Dr. Bill Lascheid, a retired dermatologist and his wife, Nancy, a nurse, observed how difficult life was for Collier County's low-income families, especially those struggling with chronic illnesses. So, the couple gathered about a dozen friends in their living room — and their posse encompassed some of Naples' most big-hearted movers and shakers — to create a volunteer-driven organization that helps uninsured adults obtain quality medical care. Established in 1999, the Neighborhood Health Clinic provides them access to general medical

practitioners, specialty clinics for complex conditions and dental care.

NHC is not designed for well visit exams, and it's not a walk-in clinic. Relying upon a volunteer staff and private philanthropy, NHC matured from treating eight patients when it opened to performing more than 27,095 procedures on prescreened patients in 2018.

GROWING NEED

To accommodate the growing needs of the 50,000 Collier County residents who qualify for its services, NHC embarked

CREDIT: NATE LANE



Dr. Alejandro Perez-Trepichio serves the Neighborhood Health Clinic and uninsured adults who require its services.

on a \$12.8 million project to develop the property two acres south of its current campus off Goodlette-Frank Road, north of Central Avenue.

The expansion is happening in three phases. Responding to a patient survey that listed dental care as a chief concern, NHC built a new dental suite that includes four operatories, a panoramic X-ray machine, and sterilization and education areas. The recently completed Phase I also includes full radiological imaging services and an expanded waiting and registration area.

Phase 2 will move to the second floor of the Armstrong Medical Building and is slotted for cardiology, ENT, gynecology, wound care and vision services. The expansion's final phase includes the Van Domelen Education and Wellness Building, consisting of classrooms and areas for meetings, patient education and research projects. A demonstration/teaching kitchen will enhance current classes such as diabetic education, pain management and smoking cessation.

The 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization is supported by 400 volunteer medical professionals with active Florida licenses and hundreds of nonmedical volunteers. Donations, foundations and grants fund the clinic's \$2.7 million annual budget. Patients typically contribute about \$20 per month for operating expenses. To qualify for care, patients must be uninsured with no government health benefits and earn at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.

Patients say the clinic transformed their lives.

"There's no two ways about it," says a man with hepatitis C, whose health could not improve while his body fought off mouth infections. He credits his dental treatment with healing him "physically, mentally and spiritually."

A woman "hid behind bad teeth" and woke up to pain every day.

"In a million years, I never, ever thought I would have a beautiful smile," she says.

A cancer patient has access to potentially life-saving follow-up scans. Thanks to new state-of-the-art MRI, CT and X-ray, (the radiology department also has mammography and ultrasound equipment), volunteer doctors are more likely to detect a possible recurrence and treat it earlier. That assurance provides peace of mind for a cancer survivor.

"This place was designed and created by beautiful people," declares a patient treated for back pain. Anyone living with untreated back issues appreciates his sentiments.

According to one volunteer doctor, patient gratitude is an unquantifiable reward — something rarely achieved to the same extent in private practices. This pure

practice of medicine helps doctors, dentists and nurses remember why they entered the medical profession to begin with.

NHC founding physician, Dr. Paul Jones, says a shift at the clinic is "food for the professional soul," and there is gratification in helping people who otherwise would go untreated. Folks stay healthy so they can continue to work and take care of their families, which is precisely the goal the founding members set out to accomplish 20 years ago.

For more information, visit NeighborhoodHealthClinic.org. ☼

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