

Conference Sets Example for Communities

By: Angela Bases, Nov. 13, 2008
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Sixteen years ago the mayor of Wooster set up a committee to determine whether or not the community needed a free clinic. Both the citizens of Wooster and Wooster Community Hospital concluded that it was necessary. While the clinic started out as a small building outside of the hospital, it later grew into something much greater.

The Viola Startzman Free Clinic is now located on Cleveland Road in Wooster. It runs full-time, serves 2,000 patients a year and has close to 10,000 patient visits each year. The numbers certainly speak for the need, but they don't measure the impact a free clinic has on a community. And that impact wouldn't be as large if it weren't for the cooperation and assistance from Wooster Community Hospital. The facility originally provided \$100,000 for renovation of the clinic. They offer free x-rays, technological support, training and allow the clinic to purchase medications at the hospital. They also provide \$15,000 a year for 10 years to cover all of the clinic's operating expenses.

The benefits reach far beyond the community, however. The relationship between the two facilities serves as a model for the other 41 communities that also operate free clinics. This was demonstrated at the recent ninth annual Ohio Association of Free Clinics (O AFC) conference in Columbus. In front of 100 attendants, Bill Sheron, CEO of Wooster Community Hospital and John Moritz, Viola Startzman Free Clinic Executive Director, spoke on a panel about their successful collaboration.

"The purpose of the panel discussion was to demonstrate to other free clinics what could be done as far as having a good relationship," Moritz explained. "It gave food for thought to other clinics."

He added that the clinic in Wooster is one of the largest in Ohio, making it even more important to offer support to the smaller facilities. Moritz also noted that all the free clinics in Ohio work pretty well together.

But if it weren't for the successful ongoing communication between the two in Wooster, there would be plenty more patients landing in the emergency room. So the hospital is certainly benefiting from the relationship as well.

Bill Sheron would certainly agree with that statement. He added that the government may not do anything to solve healthcare issues, so it's vital that individuals and communities do something about it themselves. With so many uninsured people, a clinic offers another option.

"We do work hand in hand," Sheron said. "We're both health care providers in town."

Sheron also explained that they hoped other communities would realize that they can work together the same way. Even communities lacking free clinics can begin to see the benefits. He viewed the conference as an opportunity elaborate on the successful history and set an example.

"I think the goal for both the hospital and the Viola Startzman Free Clinic is to produce a healthy community. With us working together in partnership, we're able to accomplish that goal," Moritz concluded. "We appreciate anything the hospital can do to help us."