New AAMC clinic reaches working poor

Roughly 2,300 patients served since January

By SHANTEÉ WOODARDS
Staff Writer

Ordinarily, the headaches Silvia Soto received from her high blood pressure would have sent her to the emergency room.

But now Soto and many of the regions's uninsured and underinsured residents can go to a clinic on Forest Drive for routine medical care. Anne Arundel Medical Center's Community Health Center provides low-cost services there to the working poor, or individuals whose incomes keep them in relative poverty.

The clinic has been operating there for just over six months as part of an effort to provide preventive care and steer patients away from emergency rooms.

"They really help because the prices are really affordable," Soto, an Annapolis resident, said through interpreter Glenda Sierra-Schulz, the clinic's site supervisor. "In addition, everybody speaks Spanish."

Since its debut in January, the Community Health Center, off Forest Drive near the Clock Tower Plaza Shopping Center, has served more than 2,300 patients like Soto.

Patients can go there during the week for reduced-cost services. There are two doctors, as well as a staff that speaks English, Spanish and Arabic. Its operations are financed by a three-year $150,000 grant from the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission, which funded 22 similar clinics around the state.

Within the Stanton Community Center, the hospital also offers the Annapolis Outreach Center, which provides free medical and dental care.

Unlike the Stanton facility, the newest clinic serves patients who have some ability to pay. The Community Health Center's prices are based on the Medicaid fee schedule. Uninsured patients can pay on a sliding scale fee, based on income.

"Free clinics are wonderful, but they sure have their limits," said Scott Eden, the medical director for the Community Health Center. "One of your goals is not to be a charity, as long as charity depends on next year's (finances). It's an interesting challenge and we're very pleased with it."

The state established the Community Health Resources Commission in 2005 to expand health care for low-income residents. It provides grants geared toward addressing infant mortality,

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increasing access to primary care and addressing dental care.

Since its inception, the program has provided nearly 80 grants totaling $21.6 million. The Health Center staff submits patient data to the Community Health Resources Commission, which is providing $50,000 annually. After the grant period is over, the clinic is expected to be self-sustaining.

Separately, Anne Arundel Health System — AAMC's parent company — has contributed about $229,000 and the Unitarian Universalist Church has made a three-year $30,000 commitment to the clinic, according to a Community Health Resources Commission report.

"The purpose is to award grants to facilities connected with community providers," said Mark Luckner, executive director of the Community Health Resources Com-

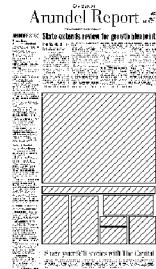mission. "When the hospital showed initiative, we thought it was a win-win."

In October, Anne Arundel Health System announced plans to create the nearly 3,000-square-foot clinic at Forest and Gemini drives. The effort fell under the health system's Vision 2020, which focused on wellness efforts for individuals and the community.

Plans were for providers there to reach 10,000 patients in the first year, eventually serving 60,000 patients over a five-year period. Eden admits that the facility is not operating near capacity, which would be the equivalent of 30 patients per day for each provider, but earlier this month a doctor was hit with 33 patients over one day.

Aside from the physicians, the Health Center also has four medical assistants and an administrative staff working full time. The facility uses AAMC's electronic medical system, so it can better track patients' medical histories, Eden said.

Annapolis resident Ramona Guzman was the facility's first patient earlier this year. She learned about it through marketing materials placed around the city. She comes in for routine care for herself and her 5-year-old daughter.

"They take care of me," Guzman said through Sierra-Schulz. "They're fast. They speak Spanish, and the medicine that the doctor prescribes has been working."

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— **Ramona Guzman**, an Annapolis resident who was the first patient at the Anne Arundel Medical Center's Community Health Center.

By Shanteé Woodards — The Capital

Nurse Audra Hernandez checks the vitals of patient Silvia Soto at Anne Arundel Medical Center's Community Health Center. Soto is among the approximately 2,300 patients who have been treated at the facility on Forest Drive since it opened in January.