

Gloucester Mathews Care Clinic celebrates 20 years of service

The Gloucester Mathews Care Clinic is celebrating 20 years of helping the community have access to health care.

By **Marie Albiges**

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When Constance Davis showed up at the **Gloucester Mathews Care Clinic** in 2016, she had been without medication to treat her **diabetes** for about six months. She had no insurance. She had stopped paying for private insurance through the marketplace after her premium went from around \$400 a month to \$1,000 a month. And she didn't qualify for **Medicaid**.

"It just really was discouraging enough for me to make the decision to live without medication, live without physician treatment," she said.

Davis had heard about the Gloucester Mathews Care Clinic — which celebrates its 20th anniversary this month — and decided to stop by one day when she was feeling especially hopeless.

For six months, Davis had gone without her daily insulin injections and eye drops to treat the glaucoma she developed as a result of diabetes.

She had reduced the number of hours she was working as a crew trainer at Hardee's, and her two children noticed their mother's energy rapidly declining.

"Just trying to live was a struggle for me without my medications," she said.

From the moment she learned that she qualified for treatment at the free clinic, things turned around for the Mathews resident.

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"Just trying to live was a struggle for me without my medications."

— Constance Davis, Gloucester Mathews Care Clinic patient

Since Davis has sensitivity to certain types of insulin, the clinic found a pharmaceutical company willing to provide special medication at no cost.

"Not only did they just go beyond measure to have those things available for me, they didn't turn me away just because I had special medications that I needed," she said.

Davis wonders what she would've done without the free clinic, which accepts patients who don't have insurance and are at or above 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

Without it, she said, "My path was death from diabetes."

Out of necessity

In 1997, two of the clinic's founders, Ann Quinn and Peggy Bowditch, set out to offer a solution to health care for the "working poor" — people such as Davis who didn't qualify for Medicaid but couldn't afford private insurance.

"When we first started, people looked at us like we had extra holes in our heads," said Bowditch, who worked with members of the Abingdon Episcopal Church to bring the free clinic to life.

After raising more than \$74,000 and securing a 1,300-square-foot building donated by Riverside **Walter Reed** Hospital, the clinic opened Aug. 1, 1998, providing services two nights a week.

Quinn recalls sitting on the porch of the clinic on that hot, humid opening night and thinking, maybe the clinic won't be needed in 10 years.

Maybe the national health care system will figure itself out, and people will receive rightful access to health care at no cost.

It was, she said, a time in America when health care was often a topic of conversation, and the clinic was supposed to be a short-term solution.

Anecdotally, the two knew a free clinic was needed in the area. Bowditch had heard of people cutting their pills in half to make them last longer and losing loved ones who had delayed getting treatment.

Fred Arnold, the clinic's first medical director, insisted the clinic include a pharmacy for people to get low-cost or free drugs.

Working in the private sector as a urologist, he knew low-income patients suffered because they refused to fill their prescriptions.

Instead, Arnold said they would put the money toward food or rent.

The executive director was the only paid staff member. All others — from clerical staff to nurses and doctors — were volunteers.

Today, the clinic operates five days a week with part-time paid and volunteer clerical staff, nurses and physicians. Seven specialty doctors voluntarily treat patients on a rotating basis.

The clinic is entirely supported through donations, grants and some local and state funding. Volunteers log thousands of hours each month, and that's not including patient referrals to specialists outside the clinic who also see patients for free.

'We're here'

Last year, the clinic served 1,007 patients and had 4,663 patient visits. It filled 22,248 prescriptions valued at \$3.79 million.

The United Way of the Virginia Peninsula estimates 36 percent of Mathews households and 38 percent of Gloucester households have incomes above the federal poverty level of \$25,100 for a family of four but below the basic cost-of-living threshold.

According to 2017 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, 9 percent of Gloucester County residents live in poverty, and 9.5 percent of people younger than 65 don't have health insurance.

In Mathews, 10.1 percent of residents live in poverty, and 9 percent of people younger than 65 don't have health insurance.

Despite the clinic being around for 20 years, Executive Director Arlene Armentor said some Gloucester and Mathews residents still don't know it exists.

"We want to keep expanding and growing, and we want people in the community to know we're here," she said.

In 2014, the clinic moved into a new 9,000-square-foot building at the Gloucester Business Park off Route 17. The new building had space for a dental clinic, something Quinn had been working to add for years.

But a shortage of funds forced staff to close the dental program in 2017. Armentor hopes to re-open the dental clinic with help from volunteer dentists in 2019.

Rather than looking at the next 20 years, Armentor is eyeing the year ahead and focusing hard on one particular item: What the expansion of Medicaid means for the clinic.

Starting Jan. 1, some clinic patients will qualify for Medicaid, and the clinic has to figure out whether it will continue to refuse insurance of any kind or become a hybrid clinic and accept Medicaid.

If the clinic decides to accept Medicaid, physicians will have to get special certifications to treat Medicaid patients, and state funding to the clinic would disappear.

"It's going to be a very transitional time for us," Armentor said.

Twenty years after the clinic opened its doors, Quinn and Bowditch think the clinic has a bit of life left — based on the state of health care in America today.

"I think there's always going to be a need, unfortunately," Bowditch said. "I think this is a good answer to help our fellow man that does fall through the cracks."

Are you eligible?

Patients must be residents of Gloucester or Mathews County, be at least 18 years old and not eligible for Medicare, have no insurance of any kind, and be at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level, which for an individual is an annual income of \$30,350.

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