

DUNGENESS VALLEY HEALTH AND WELLNESS CLINIC
Sequim, Washington



Over the past eight years the volunteer medical team at DVHWC has provided more than 6,272 of our uninsured neighbors with high quality, basic health care. Now, with unemployment at an all-time high of more than 9%, we're seeing many more patients at DVHWC than we have in years past. Patient visits increased by 30% last year; and so far this year we've seen a 23% rise in patients.

A local need, a local solution

Here in Sequim, back in the year 2000, Mary Griffith, parish nurse at Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, identified a need in our community that presaged the issues facing America today. "I answered a lot of phone calls from newcomers to the community who needed to see a doctor, but couldn't find one," she says. "The majority of calls came from retired folks who were no longer receiving insurance benefits from employers, but were not yet eligible to receive Medicare."

In response, Mary launched Sequim's free clinic, with a little help from her friends. At the time they believed they were providing a temporary solution to a temporary problem. "We thought the need was retired people in the 'gap,'" Mary says. "The matter of the larger gap -- folks without any health insurance benefits —that wasn't top of mind."

More than meets the eye

It wasn't long, though, before the issue of the uninsured did present itself. At first most of the people who came to the Clinic had acute needs – about 3 to 1 over patients with chronic health issues, according to Mary and the Clinic's statistics. Soon the hospital emergency room and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) started sending more people without insurance to the Sequim Clinic.

Changing services to meet changing needs

Over time the Clinic began to see more and more people with severe health problems. "That's what can happen when people put off their health care because they can't afford to see a doctor," Mary says. "What seems like a small problem today may evolve into a serious problem later in life if overlooked."

"I remember one woman who came in with blood sugar levels that were just huge," she says. "We saw another, fairly young lady who had extremely high blood pressure. " Treatment for those women involved helping them get their health problem under control and then teaching them how to self manage.

Working on Wellness

The increase in patients coming to the clinic with chronic illness led DVHWC to establish the ***Chronic Healthcare Clinic (CHC)*** and the complementary program, ***WOW! Working on Wellness***. The CHC provides continuity of care with a single provider for patients with a progressive illness like diabetes, high blood pressure, or respiratory conditions. It also provides educational opportunities to help those with a chronic illness manage their health and slow the disease process.

The latter seeks to grab people's attention before the onset of disease. It's a community health information outreach program that offers monthly Wellness forums and special educational opportunities to raise awareness about individual responsibility for maintaining optimal health.

"We created the Clinic because it was needed, and we did everything we could to make it good." Mary says "That was the driving force behind it in the beginning and that is the force that continues today." It is amazing and gratifying to see how far the clinic has come and with the help of so many people. That is the fabric of this town, that people came together to help one another," she says.

The local impact of Health Care Reform

If only our nation's lawmakers could take a lesson from the story of our rural community's free clinic and the evolution of other free clinics throughout Washington and America. In every case it's the story of people coming together to help each other, "it's about the fabric of America." If only.

Many of us wonder what will happen when a national Health Care Reform bill is passed. Will it change the number of uninsured in Clallam County and the greater Sequim area? Will there be a future need for Dungeness Valley Health and Wellness Clinic and other free clinics in Washington and nationwide? Eric Lewis, CEO of Olympic Medical Center and DVHWC Board Member, offers some thoughts on these and related questions.

"Many provisions of the bills (Senate and House versions) are designed to provide increased access to health insurance. Most would become effective in 2014.

"Currently, approximately 15% of the U.S. population does not have health insurance. If it passes, Health Care Reform is projected to reduce the number of uninsured to an estimated 6% of the population by 2019.

"Yet, given the challenge of the current economic situation, the need for services offered by our Sequim Clinic and those of other free clinics are expected to increase between now and 2014. Thereafter, if health care reform passes and the anticipated health insurance provisions take effect in 2014, the number of uninsured should begin to decrease significantly.

"We currently have over 9,000 uninsured residents in Clallam County. Consequently, even if health care reform is successful and the uninsured population shrinks from 15% to 6% of the population by 2019, we will still have an estimated uninsured population of approximately 4,000 residents here. And, due to

lack of cost controls in the reform bills, the number of uninsured may not decrease as much as estimated.

“Still, there are provisions of the Health Care Reform bills which are helpful. The sections of the Health Care Reform bills focused on increased wellness, primary care physician supply and chronic disease management should improve our health care system.

“We believe personal responsibility for one’s wellness is critical and that access to quality primary care improves outcomes, reduces costs and is an important part of a healthy community.”