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Retired Doctors, Retired Nurses, Very Busy Clinics

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GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass.

After working for years as a pediatric nurse practitioner here, Lynne Shiels was hardly naïve about the costs of health care but nonetheless thought that everyone in this picturesque area had access to medical help.

This is Berkshire County, after all, a blue place in one of the bluest states, a magnet for music lovers and antiques collectors that seems to have as many government-financed medical programs as it does boarding schools and Colonial-era farms.

But Mrs. Shiels was astonished to learn, once she started helping at a new clinic run by Volunteers in Medicine Berkshires, just how many uninsured residents the county has - not just recent immigrants but native sons and daughters whose medical benefits have vanished as factories have closed, or whose co-payments have become too expensive to carry.

"The biggest thing that's been an eye-opener to me," said Mrs. Shiels, a volunteer nurse at the free clinic, "is that a big part of our patients are not only undocumented workers but people who were insured at one time, lost their insurance, stopped going for any kind of ongoing health care and are coming to us with a variety of problems."

The clinic has been a revelation for nearly everyone involved since it opened less than a year ago.

Dr. Howard Arkans, a deeply tanned pediatrician and insurance company administrator who retired to pamper his grandchildren and play tennis, has been surprised by his own level of commitment, volunteering 20 hours a week or more as medical director. Leonard Simon, a retired bank executive who was among the clinic's founders and serves on its board, has been impressed by the local altruism that supplies a \$300,000 yearly operating budget and a spreading circle of doctors, nurses and psychologists giving pro bono care. Estella Bodnar, a daughter of Puerto Rican immigrants who is one of the clinic's three Spanish-language interpreters, has been moved by the changing face of Berkshire County, where the population of 132,000 is thought to include 10,000 Latinos; more than half the clinic's patients so far are Hispanic.

"We've had people who've never had medical attention, ever," Ms. Bodnar said. "Some are coming in because they haven't been to a doctor in many years. Some people haven't known what the [blood pressure apparatus](#) is or even what having a blood-pressure check means."

Berkshire County is hardly alone in its demographic shifts and economic stresses on even its longtime citizens. The clinic in Great Barrington is the newest in a growing network operated by Volunteers in Medicine, each clinic slightly different and tailored to local needs but all committed to helping people without medical insurance. All shun government funds so services cannot be limited. The clinics also rely on volunteers, especially the skills of retired health care workers, an "untapped treasure trove," said Amy Hamlin, executive director of Volunteers in Medicine.

"Many people who've been clinicians love the practice of medicine and hate the business end of it, that in many instances has quashed or cut back in the joy of practicing," Ms. Hamlin said by phone from the group's headquarters in Burlington, Vt. "So by eliminating all that in our clinics, the retirees have the option to practice just good medicine and just care for people."

The nonprofit program began in 1993 in Hilton Head, S.C., when a recently retired doctor, Jack B. McConnell, was appalled by the lack of health care available to poor people in the region, many of whom provided services to prosperous retirees or second-home owners. His model has been followed at a steady pace - there are 44 Volunteers in Medicine clinics - as the number of uninsured Americans has grown to nearly 46 million. The American Medical Association recently recognized the achievement by creating the Jack McConnell Award for Volunteerism, to go to a doctor over 55 years old. (Nominations are due in December and the first award will be given in March.)

Like Dr. McConnell, Mr. Simon and his friends were disturbed by the gap between their own comforts and their neighbors' hardships.

After some debate over the clinic's role within Berkshire County, and a few resignations from the board, the remaining founders decided to focus on preventive care. "We are not a walk-in clinic," Mr. Simon said. Once patients are deemed eligible for the services - they must be 19 to 65 years old, with an income of no more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level - an hourlong physical is scheduled, which includes a complete medical history and blood work. All patients are screened for [diabetes](#), high-blood pressure and high [cholesterol](#). Many receive free medication and monitoring for those conditions and others, including [depression](#). Women receive Pap tests on site and are referred for [mammograms](#).

For now, treatments for all but the most basic diagnoses are referred elsewhere, but the clinic's volunteers drive patients without cars to their specialists or hospital visits and help them with paperwork. They have even gone door to door, including the time Mrs. Shiels found one of her patients, a homeless and unemployed housekeeper, asleep on a porch. "I woke her up and told her why she had to go the emergency room immediately," Mrs. Shiels said.

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The woman had come into the clinic for severe bruising; a blood test revealed she had ITP, or Immune Thrombocytopenic Purpura, a condition in which the body produces a dangerously low number of blood platelets. Once seen by a hematologist and placed on medication, including more medicine to treat a thyroid imbalance, her condition stabilized and her depression and listlessness lifted. "She's now renting an apartment, able to work and is a completely different person," Mrs. Shiels said.

The clinic is on Route 7, Great Barrington's main thoroughfare, across from two supermarkets and next to a popular bagel shop. Each of its three, completely private examination rooms includes a laptop because the clinic's record-keeping system is electronic. An expansion is planned to add an eye clinic and a second dental room.

Dr. David Kanter, a retired dentist from New Jersey who has been advising the clinic, is getting a Massachusetts license so he can work directly with patients. Dr. Kanter views good dental care as not only part of one's overall health, but also a ticket to a better job and better life.

"My goal," he said, "is to provide not only good dental health but a cosmetically good smile because, after all, when we're interviewing someone to hire them, what do we look at? Oral health can influence [heart disease](#) and good health in general, but cosmetically it's important, too."

Other clinics operated by Volunteers in Medicine already provide more services on site. Over the last five years, the Parker Family Health Center in Red Bank, N.J., run by a retired oncologist, Dr. Gene Cheslock, has treated 30,000 adults and children. The clinic includes a diabetes center and eye clinic and has an operating budget of more than \$600,000 a year, all locally financed. Like the clinic in the Berkshires, about 60 percent of its patients are Hispanic, most of them undocumented workers, and detractors have accused Dr. Cheslock and his staff of enabling a vast burden on the country's economy. But Dr. Cheslock is unmoved.

"If you actually dig into some of the statistics," he said, "you'll know that they provided billions to the Social Security system last year. Even though the money was paid through a bogus number, it still went into the system and was used by the system. By paying rent, by shopping locally, they do kick into the system and make it run."

