



Holy Cross High School graduates Jackie Meiluta (left) and Dr. Elizabeth Crowley discuss the goals of the Volunteers in Medicine Clinic in Cape May Courthouse. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

LENDING A HAND

By: PEG QUANN

Burlington County Times 9/23/10

Two alumnae of Holy Cross High School in Delran are more than busy with their part-time jobs of providing medical care for the poor and uninsured at the Jersey Shore.

The two have many helping hands but could use a few more, particularly doctors and others with medical expertise.

Dr. Elizabeth Crowley of Marmora and Jackie Meiluta of Sea Isle City run the Volunteers in Medicine of Cape May County clinic in Cape May Courthouse.

Their years at Holy Cross were influential. "Charity and generosity was part of the culture," Crowley said.

Crowley, who grew up in Mount Laurel as Elizabeth Tacelosky, is the medical director of the facility that provides free or reduced-price medical care. Meiluta, who grew up in Delran, is executive director.

The two women lead a team of 100 volunteers that provides medical care, social services, and other support to Cape May County's many uninsured residents.

Since its opening in 2002, the Volunteers in Medicine site on Route 9 has treated 3,000 patients in 15,000 visits. Now the wait for an appointment is about two months.

"We need volunteer doctors. The more providers we have, the more patients we can see, the more good we can do," Crowley said.

Meiluta said the clinic has a large client list "because of the seasonality of the workforce." Cape May County is a bustling vacation destination in the summer months but less so the rest of the year.

"Most people don't have full-time, year-round employment," she said, so they and their families don't have health benefits at work and can't afford to buy private insurance.

Three years ago Meiluta volunteered at the clinic after hearing about it from a family friend, a nurse who was involved. A graduate of Fairfield University, she runs her own business management consulting firm, 201 Associates, and leads the business side of the clinic's operations.

For people without insurance or a prescription plan, getting the care they need can be especially tricky. The clinic's staff helps them find ways to acquire medication or line up appointments with specialists.

"I love what I do. It breaks my heart - the people who don't have access to health care," Meiluta said.

Crowley feels the same. Ever since she broke her arm as an 8-year-old, she wanted to become a doctor. A graduate of the Medical College of Pennsylvania, the wife and mother of two now has her own family practice in Cape May Courthouse.

"I love family medicine," she said. She works there three days a week and at the clinic a day and a half. Other doctors who live at the shore year-round or who have summer homes there also volunteer. But the need is great.

"We'd love to treat people that can come in right away," Crowley said.

One volunteer, Dr. Divo Messori, a gastroenterologist with offices in Colmar, Pa., and Flourtown, Pa., owns a condominium in Lower Township. He has worked at the clinic for two years.

"Obviously in this area we do take care of a lot of working poor," Messori said.

He has treated some patients for hepatitis C, an infection that can be acquired through tattoos or drug use.

"It's always a challenge because of economic reasons to get them appropriate therapy as well as follow-up," he said.

Messori helps "because I enjoy medicine. I enjoy taking care of patients."

The Volunteers in Medicine clinic also tries to provide quality care, including nutritional counseling, to patients with diabetes or who would be prone to get it.

Deborah Heart and Lung Center in the Browns Mills section of Pemberton Township helps the clinic with cardiac, pulmonary and vascular cases.

Dr. Lynn McGrath, vice president of medical affairs and chairman of the department of surgery, said the hospital's mission is to provide quality care for all patients, including "those who can't afford it." Deborah depends on its foundation to raise funds.

"We have never submitted a bill (to a patient), never asked for a co-pay or deductible," McGrath said.

Crowley and Meiluta applaud the federal government's plan to provide universal health coverage, but said that plan is just getting off the ground. It will be years before clinics like theirs are not needed.

"It's a start. There's a lot more to be done," Crowley said.

"We have a great group here - nurses and social workers, a nice team of people + who agree that everyone does deserve health care," she said. "It's a really awesome place."

The clinic provides medical malpractice insurance for doctors when treating clinic patients. Crowley said she realizes most doctors are very busy with their own practices and don't have much time for outside activities. She knows how hectic life can be and hopes some retired physicians or those who have shore homes will spare a few hours a month to volunteer.

According to its website, Volunteers in Medicine is "the only national nonprofit dedicated to assisting communities in developing free clinics." Its network includes 81 independent clinics nationwide. Besides Cape May, there are clinics in Hackensack and Red Bank and in Southampton, Pa.

To volunteer at the Cape May clinic, call Meiluta at 609-463-2846, ext. 106.