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St. Catherine medical clinic offers care for uninsured

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Written by Ayana Jones
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When Dr. Sheila Davis and physician assistant Michele Palos-Samsi noticed a lack of primary health care services for the uninsured in the city's Germantown section, they opened a clinic in response.

When the duo launched St. Catherine Labouré Medical Clinic 10 years ago, they served a small group of uninsured residents.



St. Catherine Labouré Medical Clinic where doctors Sheila Davis, D.O., left, Katarzyna Calderon, CRNP and Michele Palos-Samsi, PA-C consult with patient Star Jefferson of Germantown. — ABDŪL R. SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER

The clinic has evolved over the years to treat approximately 1,000 patients annually that suffer from ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, depression and chronic allergies. Approximately 90 percent of St. Catherine's patients are African American and are between the ages of 35 and 64.

As the nation grapples with the economic downturn and rising rates of unemployment, the number of uninsured individuals continues to grow.

Findings of the 2008 Southeastern Pennsylvania Household Survey conducted by the Public Health Management Corporation indicate that African Americans in the region are twice as likely to be uninsured than whites and Asians.

Due to the economic climate, St. Catherine's is seeing an upsurge in the number of new patients seeking care. In order to effectively meet the growing demand, St. Catherine's has launched an annual fund campaign with a goal of raising \$550,000 by the end of the year.

"What we're doing is really trying to build some additional support in the community through engaging new donors in our mission so that we can preemptively prepare for what we expect to be a big increase in our patient population," said Jana Wilcox, St. Catherine's development director. The clinic's efforts will be bolstered by \$40,000 IMPACT award from GlaxoSmithKline. St. Catherine's is one of 10 nonprofits who will receive GSK IMPACT awards on March 17, which acknowledges organizations in the Greater Philadelphia region that provide access to the underserved.

Other awardees include Breastfeeding Resource Center, Casa Guadalupe Center, Co-County Wellness Services, ElderNet of Lower Merion and Narberth, Family and Community Service of Delaware County, Libertate, Inc., Public Citizens for Children and Youth, Resources for Children's Health and Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition.

"The award itself is wonderful because it is always amazing to be recognized for what you're doing," Davis said. "This is our 10th year and to have the formal recognition from GlaxoSmithKline is something that is very special."

The funding will be used to help the clinic further build its capacity and work towards sustainability.

"The funding is a godsend because it allowed us to be able to move forward with getting the help we needed for the development work and to be able to do the capacity building that was necessary," she said.

"This GlaxoSmithKline award is really something that couldn't have come at a better time. It really allowed us to move forward in a way that we would not have been able to."

For Germantown resident Star Jefferson, the clinic has served as her primary source of health care for the last two years. One of her classmates at the Community College of Philadelphia informed her about the clinic.

"I considered it a godsend because I lived in the neighborhood and never even knew about it," she said.

Jefferson, who suffers from high blood pressure, appreciates being able to obtain her medication onsite. When she was suffering from depression, the clinic referred her to Northwestern Services for mental health assistance.

"They make people feel like human beings. They explain what's going on. The doctors take the

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time to talk to you. It's not like you are just a number," said Jefferson, noting that the medical staff is genuinely concerned about their patients.

St. Catherine's provides various services ranging from medical exams, management for chronic diseases, arrangement of diagnostic testing and specialty care, lab testing and health education.

Patients pay \$10 at the time of visit, however the actual cost of a patient visit to St. Catherine's is \$100 including labs and medications.

St. Catherine's evolved from humble beginnings. Palos-Samsi and Davis were spurred to open the clinic after assessing the needs in the community and finding that many uninsured residents were either forgoing medical care or relying on City of Philadelphia's Health Clinics where they had to deal with lengthy waits.

The clinic first opened in 1999 in St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church with no real financial backing and limited hours. During the early days, St. Catherine's received most of its referrals from the church's soup kitchen nursing clinic. The clinic was marketed through grassroots efforts such as passing out flyers to neighboring businesses.

"We started off very small. We didn't have any equipment – just our stethoscopes and our diagnostic kit," Palos-Samsi recollected.

The two founders juggled running the clinic while still working full-time jobs and raising small children. They began to operate under a non-profit entity named Face to Face and over time they were able to focus on working at the clinic. Within two years, the clinic outgrew its space in the church and moved to the Germantown YMCA.

Like many other nonprofits, St. Catherine's has seen its share of challenging fiscal times. The organization receives the bulk of its funding through private foundations and grants. When funding dipped back in 2004, the clinic's future looked grim. With the help of the Independence Blue Cross Charitable Medical Care Grant Program, it was able to rally and subsequently moved into its current location at 5838 Germantown Ave.

While the clinic has moved and evolved within the last 10 years, its focus on serving the uninsured hasn't wavered.

"When we started that was our focus — serving the uninsured," Davis said. "There's still a gap and that's still our focus."

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