



St. Catherine Laboure Medical Clinic where doctors Sheila Davis, left, Katarzyna Calderon, and Michele Palos-Samsi, consult with patient Star Jefferson of Germantown. — PHOTO BY ABUL K. ISLAM/THE PHILADELPHIA TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER

St. Catherine medical clinic offers care for the uninsured

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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 Laboure Medical Clinic 10 years ago, they served a small group of uninsured residents.

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 \$500,000 by the end of the year.

"What we're doing is really trying to build some additional support in the community through engaging new



St. Catherine Laboure Medical, 5838 Germantown Ave., has been providing low-cost primary medical care to uninsured adults for 10 years.

St. Catherine

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comes in our mission so that we can proactively prepare for what we expect to be a big increase in our patient population," said Joris Wilson, St. Catherine's development director.

The clinic's efforts will be bolstered by \$400,000 IMFACT award from GlaxoSmithKline. St. Catherine's is one of 10 recipients who will receive GSK IMFACT awards in March 17, which acknowledges organizations in the Greater Philadelphia region that provide access to the underserved.

Other awardees include Broadening Resource Center, Casa Guadalupe Center, Co-City Wellness Services, ElderNet of Lower Merion and Norbeth, Family and Community Service of Delaware County, Liberman, Inc., Public Clinics for Children and Youth, Resources for Children's Health and Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association, Crossroads Christian.

"The award itself is wonderful because it is always interesting to be recognized for what you're doing," she 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.

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

St. Catherine's provides various services ranging from medical exams, management of 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 lab and medications.

St. Catherine's evolved from humble beginnings. Pales-Sarraz and Davis were spurred to open

the clinic after assessing the needs in the community and finding that many uninsured residents were either foregoing 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 running 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," Pales-Sarraz recalled.

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



Germantown resident Star Jefferson, 57, has been a patient at the St. Catherine Labourer Medical Clinic for two years.

clinic outgrew its space in the church and moved to the Germantown YMCA.

Like most 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 5830 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."