



FACES OF THE SAFETY NET

by Jessica Waclawski

Since 1887, a small house has stood on the corner of 15th and Water Streets in Idaho Springs while the town that surrounded it grew and changed. Recently this charming house captured the attention of a prominent local doctor, Elane Shirar, M.D. Dr. Shirar purchased the house to give the building a new purpose: to be the one and only medical clinic for the residents of Clear Creek County.



The old and original foundation of the Meadows clinic.

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“This place is really characteristic of a rural clinic and speaks to the importance of filling this gap in Colorado’s safety net,” commented Rich Marquez of the Colorado Rural Health Center, while opening the white antique iron gate to the clinic’s entrance. On the clinic’s fence is a newly painted sign that welcomes guest to the Meadows Family Medical Center.

Walking through the front door, visitors are greeted by one of the clinic’s four staff members. The lobby is akin to a family room rather than a waiting room, with a basket of toys in the corner and an assortment of magazines on the table. Patients can relax while gazing out the windows that are decorated with lace curtains and listening to the distant sounds of a radio playing in an adjoining office where a cast iron stove warms the air.

Sitting patiently with a friend, an older man sips on a cool glass of water from the pitcher that rests on a small table near the front door. A teenager waits with her dad, flipping through the latest issue of Cosmopolitan. Calmly, an emergency medical team transports a young boy on a stretcher past the guests in the “family room” and out the front door as though it were normal routine.

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MEADOWS FAMILY MEDICAL CENTER

The Colorado Health Institute (CHI) is an independent, nonprofit health policy and research organization based in Denver. It was established in 2002 by Caring for Colorado Foundation, The Colorado Trust and Rose Community Foundation. CHI’s mission is to advance the overall health of the people of Colorado by serving as an independent and impartial source of reliable and relevant data for informed decisionmaking.



Current front entrance of the clinic.



Liz Tyus and Cheryl Woodward.

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“We have a great relationship with the Emergency Medical staff,” reported Liz Tyus, the office manager for the clinic. “This is necessary when the nearest hospital is over 40 minutes away.”

After opening its doors in March, the clinic has doubled the number of patients it sees each day to about 20. From pediatrics to geriatrics, well visits to gunshot wounds, no patient is the same and neither are their stories.

“Every Friday we must have at least five trauma situations,” said Tyus. The clinic staff does its best to deal with each condition that appears at their door. “A man came in last week with a chainsaw injury to his leg, using duct tape as a band-aid,” Tyus reports with a shrug of her shoulders. “We sewed him up and sent him on his way.”



A former kitchen, serving as the back office for clinic staff.

Word of mouth has traveled fast and Meadows Family Medical Clinic serves not only patients from Clear Creek County but also Golden, Central City, Northglenn and Blackhawk. “If someone wants to make the drive, we’ll see them,” commented Cheryl Woodward, Dr. Shirar’s executive assistant. “You’re not going to get a \$39 doctor visit anywhere else for the same quality of care. At Meadows, we don’t cut any corners.”

That \$39 covers all basic visits excluding needed medications, supplies or additional tests. Clinic patients are a mix of self-pay, publicly insured and private insurance card holders.



Reception desk.

“People feel different coming to our clinic. They feel they belong here. They’re a name and not just a number,” said Tyus.

Every Wednesday Tyus and Jim Keller, a Physician’s Assistant, travel to those patients who are unable to come to the clinic due to their health condition.

“She [Dr. Shirar] is a modern woman with traditional values,” commented Woodward. “These days, what doctor offers home visits? Dr. Shirar just knows what needs to be done in each of the communities we serve.”

Dr. Shirar may have traditional values but she continues to look for innovative means to deliver quality care to her patients. In the past month, she continued her quest to deliver quality care to her patients. For example, the Meadows clinic recently implemented an Electronic Medical Record (EMR) system to build a comprehensive medical record for each patient. The back office, formerly a dining room and kitchen, is lined with paper patient files that staff is inputting into the new electronic patient database.

“It was a monster at first. But we’re staying on the edge so that we can offer better care,” said Woodward. Giving Woodward a nudge, Tyus added with a laugh, “We’re a small town but we’re as fast as McDonalds!”

As a small town, Idaho Springs has seen clinics come and go. Unable to compete with rising health care costs and low Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement, previous clinics have had to close up shop. Currently, Meadows is facing its share of challenges but is determined to stay in business. The staff has been engaged in the process of becoming designated as a federally qualified Rural Health Clinic (RHC) for nearly a year and is receiving assistance from the Colorado Rural Health Center. With RHC certification,

Meadows will receive cost-based reimbursement from both the Medicaid and Medicare programs. Cost-based reimbursement provides an enriched source of funding from these two federally-sponsored programs.

“It’s just a hurdle we need to overcome,” Woodward said. “Too many other practices are trying to make money. We’re not concerned with what we’re going to get in return.”



The atmosphere at Meadows Family Medical Clinic is warm and inviting, exposing the passion behind the practice. “We’re all family at the clinic and this is why we love what we do,” said Tyus. “Together, we ensure that our community is taken care of.”

Like all families, Meadows is destined to experience growth and change. Looking into the backyard, Tyus and Woodward explained how they have begun thinking about expanding the clinic.



Rich Marquez, from Colorado Rural Health Center, sits comfortably in the clinic’s waiting room.

“Our goal is to grow and to continue to double the number of patients we are able to see,” said Tyus. “If people need care, that’s what is important to us.”

Meadows Family Medical Clinic is but one among many practices Dr. Shirar has started. From Denver to Yellowstone, she has dedicated herself to providing care to vulnerable populations, Tyus said.

“Dr. Shirar is always contemplating and asking, ‘what can I do next?’”

When a patient enters the clinic, they see a framed black-and-white picture of an old house above the doorway. It’s the home of an old woman who stands on the doorstep of what is now the Meadows Family Medical Clinic.

“That picture really represents us,” said Woodward, reflecting on the sound structure and sustainability of this house. “This is rural health. Everyday we are meeting the needs of the indigent and uninsured.”

For more information on CHI’s safety net work, contact Jeff Bontrager, Senior Research Analyst, 303.831.4200, x 205.

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