



FACES OF THE SAFETY NET

by Jessica Waclawski

The door opened and a smiling woman welcomed a man inside. Seeing that he wore a pair of shorts and a Colorado Avalanche hockey t-shirt the woman joked, asking if spring had arrived early. He responded with a chuckle behind a full white beard that was framed by graying hair pulled smoothly into a pony tail.

Regular visitors call the smiling woman “Doctor Ruth.” She is the nurse coordinator at the SET Homeless Clinic in Colorado Springs. Eric Johnson is a regular who has been coming to SET ever since he could remember. For Johnson, the clinic is a reliable resource for medical care, a clean pair of socks and a friendly face.

“This place is a godsend,” commented Johnson, who leaned on a wall waiting for his consultation. “People would be in bad shape if this clinic wasn’t here.”

SET is an acronym for Service, Empowerment and Transformation. The homeless clinic is one aspect of SET’s services, which also include a family clinic and a senior care program.

“Everyone deserves quality care,” said Ruth in between running to get supplies and caring for patients.

Sitting at the front desk is Barb Cronin, the volunteer services coordinator for SET. Today, she is helping to check in patients and manage their files.

“I love coming here,” said Cronin, whose pink sweater stood out against the white walls of the small clinic space. “The clients are lovely and so appreciative of the care they receive.”

The clinic primarily treats acute illnesses, with seasonal changes playing a significant role in what care the doctors and Ruth provide. From seizures to

SET Family Medical
and Homeless Clinic

SET hours of operation:
Monday-Friday | 11:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m.,

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SET FAMILY MEDICAL AND HOMELESS CLINIC

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.



The SET homeless clinic.



Barbara, Ruth and Dr. Dillon,

frostbite, the clinic is busy with a waiting room full of patients from 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m., Monday through Friday.

“It’s hard to get in other places,” said Ruth. Without sufficient funding, the homeless shelter and veterans clinic experience long waiting lines and are unable to meet the demand for medical care. The SET clinic seeks to help fill this gap by providing quality care for those in the community who are homeless.

“If I didn’t come here, I’d probably try to go to the veterans clinic,” said Johnson, after talking to Dr. Jack Dillon, a volunteer physician and Medical Director at the Clinic, who discussed the Tylenol and allergy medication being provided to Johnson. “The wait is just so long you can’t get in.”

Cronin hands hygiene products such as soap and toothpaste to a man who stopped in to check on the status of his new glasses. In addition, the clinic offers a sock exchange booth in a far corner. Visitors can trade in their old socks for a new pair. The old socks are then washed and reused if not worn out.

With a well-bandaged hand, a man named John stepped out of the exam room while Dr. Dillon explained how to keep the wound clean. John is referred to as the “success story” by the SET staff that was eager to discuss the details of his experience.

John had lived with a ganglion cyst for years. When it started to get larger, he expressed that he wanted it removed. A week ago, he had surgery at Memorial Hospital North after the clinic helped him navigate the system and become qualified for the Colorado Indigent Care Program (CICP).

CICP is a funding stream of federal and state dollars available to partially compensate certain health care providers that see a significant number of people at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level.

“It didn’t hurt at first. These cuts on my other hand have been bothering me more,” said John with an intense stare from his blinded eye. He discussed details of the surgery, confidently using medical terminology one would expect from a health care professional. He began showing the staff all the business cards he had collected at the time of the surgery. He pointed to one, “That’s the guy who did the surgery, Dr. Hart.”

The SET homeless clinic relies on the volunteer time of 22 physicians. Dr. Dillon is a specialist in the Penrose Emergency Department, a position that provides him additional insight into the care needs of indigent patients.

“I talk with my partners at the hospital and share stories about the level of patient gratitude experienced at this clinic. In the ER, patients are more demanding because it’s so hectic and time for quality care is scarce,” said Dr. Dillon. “The ER just isn’t always the most appropriate choice.”

Medical Providers travel from Monument and Palmer Lake, nearly 30 miles away, to give their time and serve at the clinic. It was this passion to give medical care to those in need that led to the establishment of SET in 1993.

“Two doctors kept approaching the Sisters of Charity saying, ‘there needs to be a family clinic.’ They were persistent as they had the initial vision,” said Barbara Jeanne Krekeler, director of operations, who has grown with SET since its beginning. Their vision was catalyzed by a study done in the South Gate area that revealed a great need for basic health care services.

The physicians served every Monday night for two hours, sharing a space in the Meadows Park Community Center. Their vision has grown substantially into a full-time family clinic with a large space in the St. Francis Hospital.

“I feel we are a true safety net because we see those who fall through the smallest cracks.”

“I really wasn’t sure it would last,” admitted Krekeler. “But those two doctors are still volunteering!”

Continuing the important role as a visionary, Zelna Joseph has been the CEO and president of SET for the past two years. She views her job as assessing the needs of the community to examine where gaps in care exist.

“I love that we are free to reinvent ourselves as needs arise,” said Joseph. Her current project is to establish an ex-offenders program that will provide acute mental and chronic health care to individuals recently released from a correctional facility.

The Colorado Department of Corrections reports that 8,954 inmates were released in 2006. With a Community Re-Entry Office located in Colorado Springs, some of these former inmates are being reincorporated into the Colorado Springs community.



Zelna Joseph, president and CEO of SET.

“Who can hold down a job if you can’t get access to needed medications?” asked Joseph. She noted that ex-offenders are given a 10-day supply of prescriptions upon their release, although without a job, these former inmates can’t afford to buy medications, some of which cost \$500 per month.

Joseph is collaborating with the Mission Medical Clinic, Open Bible Clinic and Harbor House to provide medical and mental health care as well as coaching in life skills. She hopes to have the program launched by the end of summer and foresees a potential for it to act as a pilot program that can be replicated elsewhere.

“I feel we are a true safety net because we see those who fall through the smallest cracks,” said Joseph, whose brightly painted fingernails rest unassumingly on the table. “In order to be well, we believe the whole person needs to be taken care of, including their spiritual and emotional health.”

The longest program SET has sustained is its Senior Program that consists of monthly wellness clinics. Medical and social assessments are provided that incorporate education, helping individuals understand their medications and overall health. The Senior Program also includes volunteers who serve as spiritual companions by visiting a senior once a month to interact on a nonmedical level while providing mental and spiritual support. The purpose of the program is to help seniors stay healthy and continue to live independently.

“We try to find what else might be affecting a person’s health by looking at what is going on in their life. I don’t think many other organizations offer this piece,” said Joseph.

SET strives to serve the entire community by managing health through a holistic approach. Success can be measured by the numerous volunteers and donations coming to SET, as well as its 17 years of achievements. Patients continue to return and seek quality care while spreading the word to others who are in need.

Walking down the hallway of the family clinic, Joseph discussed the support of the community and the appreciation of the patients. “Some won’t have the \$10 registration fee on the day of their visit but will give the last 30 cents in their pocket. They come back once they have the \$10 because they want to contribute, but they are in a system that won’t allow them to.”

Sitting down in an exam room, Joseph stated, “I’m proud of the work we do here. I go home and feel a great sense of accomplishment thinking about the people we’ve helped.”

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