



The Need for Free Clinic Programs in an Uncertain Healthcare Landscape: Funding Increase of \$340,000 Needed to Sustain Services

While healthcare access has changed for better and for worse over the years, there has been one unwavering resource for the most vulnerable Vermonters: the free clinic programs that make up the Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured (VCCU). What started as a group of six clinics in 1994 has grown into a coalition of nine free clinic programs across the state that are always there for those who need us most. Though insurance, providers, facilities, and legislation come and go, the free clinic programs are constant and deftly adapt to the needs of those walking through our doors. After years of level-funding, a recent loss of other funding, and a steady increase in demand, we are requesting an increase of \$340,000 in our FY19 allocation through the Dept. of Health to sustain our services.

Since the coalition began, the need for greater access to care has continued to increase. In the last ten years the number of Vermonters we served has more than doubled, up from 3,594 in 2006 to 8,084 in 2016. The people who rely on the free clinic programs are diverse. Half have a high school education or less, approximately one third are employed at least part-time, one third are either retired or disabled, and one third are unemployed. 62% have income that is at 150% of the federal poverty level or less. We are serving people who are living paycheck to paycheck, and have a complex set of needs. Though the number of Vermonters with insurance has increased, so has the number of “underinsured” who can’t afford their deductibles and co-pays, and we consistently see patients return after giving up their insurance. This sort of “churning” of people into and out of the State’s insurance and support systems is common in the populations we serve and presents a baseline demand for our services. The free clinic programs also care for migrant farm workers and other undocumented individuals who will never be eligible for health insurance. With political uncertainties still plaguing the Affordable Care Act, the number of vulnerable people in our state who need our services will continue to rise.

The free clinic programs provide patients with the resources to meet their needs, from patient navigation of VT Health Connect to prescription assistance enrollment. Clinic work is funded through a variety of private grants, individual gifts and foundation support. A significant piece of clinic funding was provided through the Department of VT Health Access (DVHA) through a grant for navigation services. Federal and State Navigator funding has ended, but the work of assisting patient access to primary care and the right insurance program will not cease. In addition, funding to several of the clinics to support the work of the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) program ended in June 2017. Without an increase in our VDH grant funding, our ability to fill the gaps left by other providers and reduced federal programs will be significantly hampered.

One of the benefits of our coalition is that VCCU free clinic programs cover much of the state from Burlington to Bennington. Coalition membership is comprised of the Bennington Free Clinic, the Good Neighbor Health Clinic and Red Logan Dental Clinic in White River Junction, the Health Assistance Program (HAP) at UVMMC in Burlington, Health Connections at Gifford in Randolph, the Open Door Clinic in Middlebury, the People’s Health & Wellness Clinic in Barre, the Rutland Free Clinic, Valley Health Connections in Springfield, and the Windsor Community Health Clinic. Each is its own organization that serves the unique needs of its community. Five programs provide medical care on site with paid and volunteer providers and four provide referral services only on site. All provide a range of services that qualify them to be part of the coalition, including:

- Insurance enrollment assistance,
- Patient care coordination and education, and
- Referral to medical homes.

Day in and day out, staff help clients understand the insurance options available to them, often spending hours navigating them through complex systems and resolving a myriad of problems. They sit with patients, learning about their lives and assisting them with finding social services, prevention and treatment programs, transportation, interpretation services, and much more. When a person comes to a clinic afraid and unable to afford their care, staff find every resource available and sign them up for prescription assistance programs, work with hospitals to get free or reduced cost lab work and screenings, and set up follow-up appointments. When the immediate situation is over, they work to get them insured and referred to a medical home. Clinic staff are the experts who know how to solve seemingly insurmountable problems.

Because our free clinic programs are independent, they are able to respond quickly as needs arise. Since dental care has been out of reach for so many Vermonters due to lack of dental insurance, lack of dental providers accepting new patients, and even fewer accepting new Medicaid patients, the free clinic programs in Barre, Middlebury, Rutland, and White River Junction embraced the challenge of providing dental services on site and have created networks of local dentists willing to take pro-bono patients. The Bennington Free Clinic, Valley Health Connections, and Windsor Community Health Clinic all purchase dental care for their patients. And since many Vermonters without dental care end up with teeth pulled because the cost of restorative work is out of reach, many of our free clinic programs have been working on finding funding for dentures, including a partnership with Catholic Charities and Affordable Dentures piloted by HAP in Burlington. The demand for dental care has been unrelenting and we expect it to continue to grow, further taxing clinic budgets.

To maintain the services low income Vermonters still desperately need, we are requesting an increase in our allocation from the state that funds the VCCU's grant through the VT Dept. of Health. The \$688,000 we receive has been vital to keeping the doors open. However, after years of being level funded despite the growing number of people we serve and the complexity of their needs, we are asking the state to increase our allocation by \$340,000 to a total of \$1,028,000. The last increase to our allocation came in 2013 to support the Bennington Free Clinic's addition to the coalition, but we are now serving more people. The work has grown, but the allocation has not. The funds the state invests in our work are well spent with each \$1 leveraging another \$4, not to mention the tens of thousands of dollars saved when we engage patients before their health requires them to go to an emergency room. At a time when traditional healthcare costs have risen considerably year after year, we have been fiscally frugal and are doing a remarkable amount with very little. An increase in state funding is necessary to make sure the vulnerable people in our state do not fall through the cracks in uncertain times.

Sincerely,

Peter Youngbaer, Board President
Steven Maier, Executive Director
Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured