



125 Tremont St Barre, VT 05641

director@vtfreeclinics.org

www.vtfreeclinics.org

**Testimony - Olivia Sharrow, MPH
Executive Director of Vermont's Free &
Referral Clinics**

**House Committee on Healthcare –
January 19, 2023**

Our History

Founded in 1995, Vermont's Free and Referral Clinics, formerly the Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured, is a nonprofit association of which the nine healthcare clinics in Vermont that provide free services are members. For more than 25 years, we have worked tirelessly to fill the gaps and meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. Our history and mission are rooted in reducing barriers people in Vermont face when trying to access care.

Although the healthcare landscape in Vermont has changed over time, our clinics have continued to play several vital roles, as entry points into the larger healthcare system, as safety nets, primary care practices, and as a critical point of care for marginalized populations.

Our Services

Our member clinics currently provide:

- Free medical, dental, and mental health services on-site and using telehealth
- Free medications and other healthcare supplies

*These values are from 2021. Our 2022 data are not yet compiled.

**Our formula incorporates the number of patients seeking medical care that do not have a primary care provider or are experiencing dental bleeding and infection, though there is an argument for including all patients seeking medical, dental, and mental health care at the free clinics.

- Care coordination and case management, including connecting to primary and specialty care services
- Insurance enrollment assistance with: Vermont Health Connect, Green Mountain Care Programs, Medicare and Medicare Supplement Insurance, You First, patient financial assistance
- Tobacco cessation, transportation, and food services

When patients can't come to us, we go out into the community to meet them where they are.

Our Funding

We are primarily funded through a legislative appropriation, managed by the Dept. of Health. From 2018 to 2022, our grant was level-funded at \$1,028,000. This amount was generously increased by 10% last year to \$1,130,800.

We leverage this funding and more to:

- Provide nearly **\$2.5 million in free medications** to Vermonters*
- Save the state **\$3.9 million in avoided emergency room costs****

Using these numbers, you can see that for each \$1 invested by the legislature, we save the state \$4. This is a conservative estimate. These numbers do not account for the work our members do to reduce the burden of medical debt by getting patients access to financial assistance at their local hospitals.

Our Services in Numbers

- **Cared for 11,538 patients in 2022**, an increase of nearly 1,500 from the year before.
- Of those, **4,385 patients were new** to our clinics.
- Provided **41,000 instances of patient support**, averaging 4 services per patient. Increased from an average of 3 services/patient in past years.
- Provided by 32 paid staff, **269 clinical and clinical support staff**, donating time **valued at nearly \$500,000**.

We do not bill per service, nor is there a per member per month contract that reimburses only certain types of care. Although this can present challenges, it also allows a flexibility to meet patients where they are and provide the best care we can, without being beholden to billing codes.

Furthermore, the structure and independence of the clinics means that they shift services to also meet the needs of their communities. In 2021 and 2022, the clinics:

- Provided thousands of COVID-19 vaccines to populations that the Department of Health would have otherwise struggled to reach.
- Created a new reproductive health clinic to fill a gap left by the local Planned Parenthood closure.
- Conducted outreach to hotels to bring services to Vermonters that are currently unhoused.

Challenges and Trends

While the quality of care and the passion of our staff and volunteers cannot be overstated, we also see concerning trends within our patient populations:

- **25% of patients have income of 150% FPL or less**. This is down from 62% in 2018, yet our patient numbers have increased by 3,700.
- **43% of patients are currently underinsured**.*** This number has increased from 35% in 2021.
- Only **60% of patients report having a primary care provider**.
- **26% of patients arrive reporting delayed care**.
- Patients are arriving with **increasingly complex SDOH needs and comorbidities**.
- Ongoing challenges accessing **dental and mental health care**.

Takeaways

Our patient numbers may seem small, they represent some of the most complex needs and those with some of the highest barriers to accessing high quality equitable care.

Data from our clinics can provide insight into structural barriers patients are facing in Vermont's healthcare system, illuminating the experiences of those on the margins, and also encourage us to ask challenging questions of ourselves and of our state.

Olivia Sharrow

director@vtfreeclinics.org

(802) 448-4280

***According to the 2021 VT Household Health Insurance Survey, 36% or 187,800 Vermonters met the Commonwealth definition for 'underinsured'

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/HSVR-VHHIS-2021-Report.pdf>