

# Honor the Work



# Respect the Workers

## Volunteers keep local free clinic operating

By L. Reidar Jensen

There are over 45 million people in the United States living without health insurance. In Centre County alone, there are over 12,000, and many of the uninsured don't seek out care until the last possible moment, or until it's too late.

But in Centre County, Centre Volunteers in Medicine [CVIM], with the help of volunteers like Carol Gold, aims to make sure that doesn't happen.

Since Day One on Feb. 10, 2003, the CVIM team has targeted Centre County's working poor, a group of people who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but too little to afford health insurance. Some work for established businesses that do not provide health care insurance, or do not hire them full-time. For those who qualify, the clinic provides free doctors' visits, dental care, medication and more.

Gold was a volunteer at the clinic even before it opened. She is a long-time State College resident and has degrees from Bucknell, Duke and Penn State. She retired from Penn State's Department of Biobehavioral Health in June, 2005.

Gold says there is a health care crisis facing low wage earners in the United States, and giving time to Centre Volunteers in Medicine is one way she has found to help.

"I get a lot of gratification in helping to open the door for people who would otherwise go without care," said Gold.

"There are a lot of people who work very, very hard to make ends meet," she said. "A lot of them are going from pillar to post in the struggle to survive in a very poor-paying economy."

Gold works at the clinic as an Eligibility Assistant.

"My role is to meet with potential clients and make sure that they're eligible for our services. Our requirements are that they can't make more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and they must be

Centre County residents."

She also does a medical history and social needs assessment with each potential client, and describes the clinic's services and expectations.

Patients who qualify for care see physicians and dentists, and are connected with social workers who can help them find health coverage, child care, or a job - all free of charge.

Along with free doctor visits and social services, some also qualify for free medication.

"The people who come to the clinic don't have very much money," said Gold. "As a result, they often can't afford their medication. We have a whole team of people who work with pharmaceutical companies to get free medication. It's a very meticulous process, but in the end we do get free medication for a lot of our clients."

While working at the clinic leaves her feeling fulfilled, Gold says it doesn't address the basic problem of poverty in our society.

"I'm sad that people are being treated as badly as they are in this country economically," Gold said. "We have such a low minimum wage. We do not have a living wage. I feel sadness when I hear that people are working hard and struggling and still are ending up with so little."

"I hear these stories, and then I go out and see the world around me. A lot of people in Centre County think we don't have poverty, because it looks like we're in fat city here. We've got all these establishments and everyone's going out to dinner, etc. But we have poverty here. [The working poor] are among us, and they're invisible to most people."

To really get to the root of the problem, Gold says, there needs to be a focus on government at both the local and national levels. She is on a political issues committee in local government and tries to focus her colleagues on the stumbling blocks facing the



Photo by L. Reidar Jensen

Carol Gold, who recently retired from Penn State University, donates some of her time to Centre Volunteers in Medicine to help the clinic's professional medical staff see as many people as they can.

working class in Centre County.

"We should mandate a minimum living wage in this county that employers are required to pay people. That would be a good beginning."

On a grander scale, she says a universal national health plan would be the greatest step towards solving the health care crisis in the United States.

Gold agreed that there has been little serious motion towards a higher minimum wage or universal health care, but the fact that there hasn't been any action on the local wage-hike front doesn't mean that the local community has forgotten those in need. In fact, Centre Countians are by far the clinic's

biggest financial supporters.

"Our contributions come from local people," Gold said. "These are people who are in the community who hear about [the clinic], know about it and realize the importance of it and want to do something to help pay back a community that's been good to them."

"One of the mottos of this clinic and other volunteer clinics across the nation is 'may we have eyes to see and hearts to care,'" Gold stated.

As long as people like Carol Gold and the other volunteers of CVIM stick around, no one in need need go unseen.

*"I have NEVER had more fun at a race!" - Jeff McClarren, Bellefonte, PA*

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