

New Jersey Herald: Doctor brings dream of free clinic to Newton

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Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald Dr. Jeffery Liegner, gives an eye exam at a free medical clinic based at the Moose Lodge in Newton. The clinic offers vision and other medical care.



Dr. Liegner examines a patient at Free Clinic Newton

Source: Dan Freel/New Jersey Herald

NEWTON -- When a young man with big dreams sat down to write his medical school application essay more than 25 years ago, he described, among other things, his aspirations of creating a mechanism to provide free care to those who needed it but were unable to pay.

Today that dream is close to becoming a reality, and in the next few weeks, Dr. Jeffrey Liegner, a native of Newton, will announce the official opening of a free clinic in the heart of the town where he was born and raised.

The effort, which has been nearly three years in the making, will not receive one dime of government funding and will be staffed entirely by volunteers. When it opens, the clinic will operate out of space provided by Moose Lodge 432, at 4 Diller Ave.

Pete Pirmann, the Moose Lodge administrator, believes the partnership could become a model for how charity care is delivered at a time when public institutions are under more pressure than ever to do more with less. He believes the effort also will help highlight the other ongoing philanthropic projects of Moose International, whose 1,800 lodges in

North America fund the Mooseheart Child City & School, in Illinois, for orphaned and abused children.

"Dr. Liegner is a wonderful, wonderful man, and when he approached us and said he wanted to do a healthcare clinic for the needy, it just touched my heart," Pirmann said. "I don't think the community even understands how large and big this is going to be."

An ophthalmologist, Liegner said the clinic will offer not only eye exams but also a range of treatments for other medical issues including chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and hypothyroidism. Diagnostic testing, including EKG and ultrasound, also will be available, as will treatments for minor injuries and, in some cases, referrals for hospitalization and certain surgical procedures. Laboratory, imaging and pharmacy services also will be developed with area suppliers and dispensaries.

In this way, Liegner believes, the clinic will save tax dollars by developing community-supported healthcare solutions without bureaucracy. He also figures it will reduce the numbers of people visiting emergency rooms for non-emergency conditions, of whom he says as many as 89 percent are typically uninsured or on Medicaid. Doing so, he notes, will spare these patients the long wait times that are often associated with poorer clinical outcomes.

Liegner, who is also president of the Sussex County Medical Society, said he already has begun seeing patients at the clinic on an as-needed basis and has briefed town officials regarding his plans. He also has been in contact with Newton Medical Center, where he will give a speech Tuesday evening, and said the volunteers at the clinic will include doctors and nurses from the hospital's staff as well as current and retired members of the Sussex County Medical Society.

A website, www.freeclinicnewton.org, has been set up and will be updated shortly with additional information.

Liegner said he already provides free care to about 10 percent of the patients he sees in his private medical practice. He said that while many physicians provide free care, most of that care remains hidden inside their practices and is unseen by the public.

"That means the community doesn't see it, but we still have the full liability when we see those patients or when I do surgery on them," he said.

The liability associated with providing this care has led many physicians to concentrate their charity care on foreign patients they treat while traveling on medical missions abroad, he said.

"I was personally frustrated that like many physicians, I was leaving the nation and traveling hours on airplanes to deliver free care in the Philippines when I had people who were blind or with glaucoma and other problems right here in my community," Liegner said.

Liegner said that according to his research, 15 percent of Sussex County residents lack health insurance. A significant portion of that total includes young adults, of whom nearly a third are uninsured. In addition, Liegner said, there are others he calls the "poor and proud," those who fall through the cracks because they are between jobs or have suffered loss of medical coverage due to divorce or other circumstances yet avoid at all costs the stigma of applying for public assistance.

Even for patients covered by Medicaid, access to care is often problematic because the costs to physicians of filling out forms and billing for services rendered often exceed whatever reimbursement they receive from the government. Hence, Liegner said, many doctors have opted out of the Medicaid system altogether.

"This means that while many Medicaid recipients have healthcare coverage, they practically have no healthcare access," Liegner said.

Through his affiliation with the American Association of Physicians and Surgeons, Liegner discovered Zarephath Health Center, a free clinic in Somerset that takes its



The exterior of Free Clinic Newton

inspiration from the Good Samaritan in the Bible and is meant to be, as its founders put it, an example of "faith in action." Founded in 2003 by former American Association of Physicians and Surgeons President Dr. Alieta Eck, the clinic has a mission of serving the poor, uninsured and underinsured, and today treats about 300 to 400 patients each week.

Liegner hopes to replicate Zarephath's success, though he intends to do so in collaboration with the Moose Lodge and other nonsectarian civic organizations rather than in the context of an explicitly faith-based mission. By having his clinic apply for recognition as a federally licensed charity, he said he also will be able to receive a special status under the Federal Tort Claims Act that will allow him to treat patients, prescribe medicines and even perform surgery while being insulated from the liability costs that discourage physicians from offering free care within their private practices.

Liegner believes this model, if replicated, also could hold the key to getting a handle on the budget-busting costs of Medicaid.

According to Eck, New Jersey currently spends about \$10 billion per year on Medicaid -- nearly a third of the state budget. Much of that money, she said, gets paid to federally qualified health centers and others who administer the program.

"Who does it pay?" Eck asked. "It pays people that run the program. It pays for these federally qualified health centers that are pretty inefficient compared to our clinics that don't pay the physicians. Ours are the real charity. At theirs, everybody's kind of highly paid. They really pad the expense accounts, and it's inefficient."

Her solution? Let doctors volunteer at least four hours per week in community-based clinics like hers and Liegner's. In exchange, have the government assume the medical malpractice liability associated with running their private practices, just as it already does for physicians and interns who work in medical schools.

As compared with an average of \$165 per Medicaid patient, Liegner said he will be able to treat patients in his clinic for an average of \$15 each. He is confident this money can be raised from private donations and that it will be sufficient to pay for medicines, equipment, electricity and other basic expenses. Since the staff will be made up of volunteers, there will be no salaries to pay. And there will be no worries about billing codes and claims forms to fill out.

Liegner believes that if freed of the attendant liability costs of running a private medical practice, many of his colleagues would jump at the opportunity to devote a few hours each week to providing free care. Eck said as many as 90 percent of the physicians she knows say they would do it "in a heartbeat."

Putting his free clinic into the community, Liegner believes, also will enable it to serve as a portal for the poor and homeless to access community social services, food and clothing banks, and recovery opportunities through counseling and other interventions.

As Eck explained, "When we have the free clinic and we have all these volunteers, the people come in with their stories. You find out why they're coming to a free clinic. What happened to them? And there's volunteers there to come alongside them to get that story, and then we have resources for them to go to."

Being insulated from liability, Liegner said, also will allow him to open his clinic to young people with a desire to explore the field of medicine while performing meaningful community service.

"One of the things I recognized is that there are no more candy-stripers and orderlies in hospitals anymore," he said. "Here they can come change bedpans, talk to grandmas, feed them, touch them, do blood pressures, ask them about their conditions, and learn whether they want to be physicians and nurses -- and I won't have to take my children to the Philippines for them to do that."

A few years ago, frustrated by the bureaucratization of medicine, Liegner began reflecting on his career choice and requested from his medical school a copy of that essay he wrote. He realized, he said, that the essay he wrote to the medical school admissions committee was really a letter to his future self. It was, he said, the beginning of a rediscovery of the calling that led him to pursue a medical career.

"If I see, and the other people who volunteer and drive by there see, that we're now taking care of the very own members of our community, there's going to be a wonderful effect of more and more people wanting to support that," Liegner said. "And for physicians who have lost touch with that inner self, there's going to be a wonderful opportunity to rediscover what made them decide to be doctors. And so I see this as the beginning of a reclamation of what medicine is, a wonderful profession."