

New Harford health clinic serves wide range of clients with and without insurance

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Harford County's first health clinic set up to serve uninsured and under-insured patients, as well as those with full health coverage, has already seen 800 patients, even though it has only been open for about eight weeks.

"This is an excellent opportunity to work with a community that is in need of health care," John Braxton, a physician's assistant at the Beacon Health Center in Havre de Grace, said Wednesday.

The Beacon Health Center, which is an expansion of services provided by the West Cecil Health Center in Conowingo, opened Dec. 8 but also held a formal grand opening ceremony Wednesday.

Beacon Health is the result of a partnership between University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Health – which operates Upper Chesapeake Medical Center in Bel Air and Harford Memorial Hospital in Havre de Grace – and the West Cecil Health Center. Upper Chesapeake is part of the University of Maryland Health System.

Upper Chesapeake, the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation Inc. and The Drescher Foundation have provided grant money to establish the new Beacon clinic in Havre de Grace. The commission was created by the Maryland General Assembly in 2005 to expand access to health care services in underserved communities, according to its website.

"It's a great example of public funding providing up-front operating support, which then leverages significant private capital support," Mark Luckner, executive director of the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission, explained.

Beacon and West Cecil are designated as "federally qualified" health centers, meaning patients with any type of insurance, or no insurance, can get medical care, as well as dental and behavioral health care.

"We are one federally qualified health center with two locations," West Cecil Health President and CEO Mark Rajkowski said.

Braxton and Dr. Gemma Armstrong are the two physicians at Beacon, part of a staff of 10 people. Both specialize in family practice medicine.

Braxton noted he has been seeing many of the same patients he has treated during the past decade while practicing at the Landmark Medical Group and the former Upper Chesapeake Health HealthLink clinic, both in Havre de Grace.

He said working at Beacon has been "like a homecoming."

"Anything, once you get across the bridge into Harford County, is like home court advantage for me," he said.

Upper Chesapeake operated its HealthLink community outreach program for 14 years, but in recent years, the organization decided to work toward establishing a federally qualified health center in Harford County.

HealthLink was designed to divert patients, who use the emergency room for primary care needs, to a primary care provider instead, but there was a greater need for affordable health care in Harford County than HealthLink could provide alone, Braxton explained.

"We did inherit a lot of people from the HealthLink program," Braxton said.

He also noted there are interpreters available at Beacon, so the clinic can serve Spanish speakers.

The clinic takes up about 4,500 square feet on the second floor of a building at 253 Lewis Lane, which is next to the Havre de Grace Medical Center.

Rajkowski said the clinic, which is fully equipped for primary health care needs, occupies a floor that has a total of 9,000 square feet, so there is room to expand.

"There is another half of this floor that would need to be developed and fitted out," he said.

Rajkowski said clinic operators plan to add behavioral health practitioners, such as a counselor and a psychiatric nurse practitioner in the next few months.

He and his wife, Christine Rajkowski, who is the practice manager for Beacon, noted the clinic can also served the thousands of Harford County residents who can be covered through the federal Affordable Care Act.

"With the Affordable Care Act expansion, there's a large population who are recently insured or are still learning how to get insurance," Mark Rajkowski said.

He said up to 11,200 people in Harford County are eligible for health insurance under the ACA, and they are looking for primary care providers.

He noted Harford County has a ratio of 3,700 patients for each provider, according to state statistics.

"That population of 11,200 that are newly insured are going to be looking for primary care providers, so we are one of the safety net providers that provide that service," he said.

Christine Rajkowski said she works with patients to determine what they will pay for care. She said they can pay on a sliding scale, or she can help patients get coverage through Maryland's health exchange or through Medicaid.

"Even if you have private insurance with a high deductible, we can do a sliding scale fee," she explained.

She said patients have come in who do not have Social Security Numbers or immigration documents such as a green card.

"Being a federally qualified health center, we cannot turn down anyone," Rajkowski said.

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