



**Ithaca Health Alliance's
A Free Clinic for the
Uninsured in Ithaca, N.Y.**

Grant Results Report – April, 2008

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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Grant Title: A Free Clinic for the Uninsured in Ithaca, N.Y.

Grant Amount: \$48,000

Grant ID: 1601195

Period Covered by the Grant: 01/01/2007–12/31/2007

Foundation Program Officer: Kelly Hunt

ABOUT THE GRANTEE

Ithaca Health Alliance is a multifaceted community health nonprofit organization. Founded in 1997 as a membership health organization, anyone with a residence in New York State can join the alliance for \$100 a year or less, through various discounted/donated enrollment options.

The first program that the health alliance developed was the Ithaca Health Fund. It makes direct health care grants to members without health insurance, primarily for emergency health care expenses, such as the cost of treating a broken bone, serious burn, or emergency dental procedure.

The Alliance's second major project is the Ithaca Free Clinic, which provides 100% free health care services for residents of Tompkins County and the surrounding region.

Ithaca Free Clinic

THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED

Some 10,000 residents of Tompkins County, N.Y., lack health insurance; many of the uninsured live below the poverty line. The Ithaca Free Clinic, the first to provide free medical care to uninsured residents of Tompkins County (of which Ithaca is the county seat), opened with limited hours in January 2006.

“Most of our patients are Caucasian, which reflects the demographics of our area,” says Rob Brown, office manager. Examples of typical clients include:

- A single mother of two who works three jobs, but makes \$100 a year more than required to qualify for Medicaid. While her children have coverage under the State's Family Health Plus program, the mother has multiple allergic sensitivities and chronic respiratory problems that require ongoing care.

- An immigrant African family in which one parent is studying for a graduate degree at nearby Cornell. The student is covered through the college, but the spouse and children are not.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Ithaca Free Clinic had a successful beginning, having served 861 patient visits in 2006, even with walk-in hours limited to two days a week. With additional funding, Ithaca Free Clinic hoped to recruit additional volunteer health professionals, enabling significant expansion of the clinic's operating hours and services offered, including a new pediatric clinic and public health education program.

UNDER THE GRANT

Ithaca Free Clinic staff reached out strongly to the community's health care providers, and especially wanted to increase the number of physician-staffed hours it offered on the two days the clinic is open to walk-in clients (a third day is reserved for by-appointment-only specialty services). But it was a "more difficult process than we had hoped," according to Brown. "Physicians work long hours, and the hours we are open are not convenient for their work schedules." Nevertheless, during 2007, Ithaca Free Clinic recruited:

- **Three new physicians**, while one retired family practice physician extended her hours.
- **Three nurse practitioners** who work with a supervising physician.
- **Eight registered nurses (RNs)**, most with experience.
- **Three chiropractors** who see patients who self-refer or are referred by physicians for back pain, structural spinal problems, or nervous system problems related to spinal injury.
- **A second acupuncturist** who is a specialist in addiction and recovery therapy.

With the clinic offering both conventional medical care and holistic care, some 19% of their patients received care from a holistic provider. "We are proud that we are one of

two medically integrated free clinics in the United States,” says Brown. “For many patients with chronic conditions, the holistic providers are an excellent choice for ongoing care.”

Statistics compiled by the clinic reveal that its practitioners had 1,880 patient visits in 2007—a 218% increase over 2006. Some 55% of those visits were by returning patients.

Says Brown, “Our large number of return patients reflects that we are becoming a primary care resource, which was not what we were planning when we started the clinic. We intended to focus on acute health care needs.”

The level of care needed for chronic health problems has required the clinic to increase referrals to outside specialists, generally arranged by the physician volunteers, who make the request that the free clinic patients be seen at no charge. “The peer-to-peer network was, and continues to be, a useful method to reach out,” says Brown.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT AND CHANGES TO ORIGINAL WORK PLAN

Ithaca Free Clinic encountered a few surprises during its grant year, which required staff to adjust accordingly.

Clinic staff recruited volunteer pediatricians and RNs for a new pediatric clinic, publicized the new service in well-targeted locations, and waited for patients to appear. Even with more publicity and outreach, after seven months the clinic had seen only 24 patients and was closed. “The failure of the clinic was disheartening,” says Brown. On the positive side, the lack of interest reflects the high level of services available in New York State through the Family Health Plus program and other county offerings.

“Our direct education outcomes also were less compelling than we had anticipated,” says Brown. “We had unrealistic ideas about how many people might want to spend a

Tuesday night at a health education workshop.” Now, instead of putting together a program, promoting it, and hoping people show up, the clinic collects names of interested individuals and sponsors an event only when there is enough expressed interest.

As a result of the above developments, the clinic had resources to redirect to two other new initiatives. Some of the pediatric clinic hours were shifted to accommodate adults who needed physical exams for employment or other reasons. The staff started a clinical nutrition program with 12 registered dieticians to help patients with diabetes and heart disease—and any others who would benefit—develop diet and nutritional plans. “This is a completely new and exciting service for us,” says Brown.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Shifts in clinic offerings during the year were aided by Ithaca Free Clinic’s data tracking and activity monitoring process, which enables continuous evaluation.

“We are constantly looking at how many people we are seeing, how we service them, how can we do better, and what are we learning about the process,” says Brown. “We work for a small organization and are used to being thrifty. If we can provide information to our funders and others regarding what we have done and learn about ourselves at the same time, then that’s the way we do it.”

THE FUTURE

With the conclusion of two grants in 2007—one from the New York State Health Foundation and the other from the city of Ithaca—future funding for the free clinic is somewhat uncertain. “We are looking at other funding sources,” says Brown. “Because we also are a membership organization, we are conducting a membership drive. We have hosted one fundraising event in the first quarter and are planning more.”

For the longer term, the board of directors of the Ithaca Health Alliance is in the midst of strategic planning process with an eye to conducting a capital campaign.