

No health insurance is no problem at health centers

Community health centers are a safety net for those with no health insurance.

By Joanne Huist Smith, Staff Writer

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Chris Stewart/Dayton Daily News Staff Photographer

"I have no insurance at all," said Robert Geer, 52, of Dayton who has his blood drawn at the East Dayton Health Center on Thursday, July 29. Patients without insurance or financial resources can get medical care on a sliding fee scale based on ability to pay at the Community Health Centers of Greater Dayton.

DAYTON — Dr. Christopher Aviles' workday begins at 8 a.m. with patients scheduled every 15 minutes to half hour at the East Dayton Health Center, a member of the Community Health Centers of Greater Dayton.

He takes time with each patient treating not only their physical needs, but often deals with socio-economic issues compounding their medical problems.

"We are their safety net," Aviles said. "We're the finger in the dam, but we're starting to replace the bricks."

Some of his patients don't have health insurance. Others on Medicaid tell him they have been turned away by private physicians.

A \$15 minimum fee - charges are based on a sliding scale — often make the health center a first stop, rather than an emergency room, Aviles said.

Community health centers serve as the medical home to an estimated 20 million Americans. The three facilities that make up Community Health Centers of Greater Dayton totalled 23,586 billable visits in 2009. While the nonprofit founded in 2007 is relatively new, its health centers – East Dayton, Charles Drew and Corwin Nixon – have long histories in Dayton.

“Community medicine is challenging. A lot of people write it off,” Aviles said. “I believe in the mission, providing medical care to the underserved.”

Aviles joined the staff at East Dayton in June. Two additional physicians will become part of the health network in August to meet a growing need for service. The group treats patients ranging from newborn to senior citizens. Staff is equipped to offer prescription assistance and mental health counseling is available. Other services such as transportation and translation are available.

Dr. Aviles attended the Wright State University School of Medicine and completed his family medicine residency at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Ill. Prior to joining East Dayton Health Center, he worked at West Portsmouth Health Center for four years, where he was associate medical director for the last two years.

Aviles said he wanted to return to the Dayton area area after his residency, but at the time Dayton was the largest Midwest city that did not have a medical facility with a federally qualified community health center designation to serve the general population. That changed in 2009.

Growing up in inner city Chicago the son of Puerto Rican immigrants, Dr. Aviles said his father worked a lifetime in this country and still did not have health insurance. His father, Wilfredo Aviles, was a board member of a community health center in Chicago.

“Community health has always been a part of my life,” Aviles said. “I have a strong belief everyone should have access to medical care.”