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Health clinic gets its groove back

New executive director helps local facility make '180-degree turn'

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Patrick Wiggins doesn't claim to walk on water. After all, the snowy-haired Wiggins is an attorney — not a miracle worker.

But what Wiggins has done during the past nine months since he stepped down from the board of directors at Neighborhood Health Services to become the health-care clinic's executive director is nothing short of miraculous.

A year ago NHS — one of two free and low-cost clinics in Tallahassee providing health care to the uninsured — was in horrible shape. Had it been a patient, its status would have been critical and on life support.

The facility in the original Lincoln High building in Frenchtown had not had a medical director in more than two years and was relying on volunteer doctors from the community to provide care. Staff morale was near rock bottom.

"It was a train wreck in progress," said Bryan Desloge, Leon County Commission chairman. "A lot of that had to do with leadership; not bad people, but poorly run."

Wiggins, on the NHS board since the early 1980s, and his fellow members decided they needed to part ways with executive director Inzlea Smith-McGlockton. Then the board rolled the dice, turning to one of its own as Wiggins, with no experience running a health-care agency, was named executive director.

"He has the organizational skill-set to get us through a stormy time in the center's history," said Otis Kirksey, a pharmacy professor at Florida A&M and chairman of the NHS board. "We had some personnel issues we needed to get around."

"We needed a person who could rally the employees," Kirksey added.

In his first month as executive director, Wiggins hired Dr. Wayne Sampson, an internal medicine doctor with a private practice in Tallahassee, to see patients part time and take on the role of medical director. He also hired a full-time nurse practitioner, Oretha Jones.

Physicians at Florida State's College of Medicine have been donating time to see patients at NHS almost since the medical school was created nine years ago, but Wiggins wanted to formalize that relationship.

On Wednesday, he signed a contract with FSU guaranteeing 24 hours of patient care per week from four different providers. The agreed upon rate, \$65 an hour, is well below the industry standard, but in Wiggins' mind, it is now a professional working arrangement.

He's also introduced electronic medical records at NHS. He believes it's the only way NHS can be more efficient — and survive.

The results have been impressive. Last October, Wiggins' first month as executive director, NHS saw 315 patients. In April, it had 980 patient visits.

"I'm just happy to say we've made a 180-degree turn from where we were," Kirksey said.

The patients are aware of the changes taking place at NHS. Erich Nold, an FSU graduate who's job hunting, said he's impressed with how NHS is managing to grow.

"I've seen the patient load rise, triple to quadruple, yet it's in and out and very efficient," Nold said. "It's not like an emergency room situation. It's kind of bare bones, but it's the kind of thing that's needed."

NHS started at FAMU in 1974 as a diabetes and hypertension clinic open two nights a week. In 1979 it moved to the basement of the Presbyterian University Center near the FSU campus and began to expand to a full-fledged health-care clinic. It relocated to its current site in the mid-1980s.

Unlike the Bond Community Health Center on Orange Avenue — which is about to move to the Tallahassee Progressive Center building on South Gadsden Street, and is the city's other so-called free clinic — NHS does not receive federal funds. Patients pay on a sliding scale with a \$5 minimum per visit.

Kirksey and FAMU pharmacy students also see patients, and Kirksey holds diabetes workshops. There is also mental-health treatment available at NHS.

The clinic saw 2,100 patients in 2008, almost equally divided between blacks and whites, and almost all of the patients came from Leon County.

"They are the epitome of the true free clinic," said Desloge, who before winning a seat on the County Commission was on the county's health-advisory board. "They get a lot done with just baling wire and gum and shoestrings.

"They're there to see the people who are falling between the cracks. They're kind of the safety net. We need to have them succeed. We need to have them keep these people from showing up at the ER."

All agree there's plenty of work still to be done at NHS. Wiggins and the board are eager to find a different facility with more and bigger exam rooms. The clinic's Web site hasn't been updated in more than a year and, as a result, contains inaccurate information.

"We still have some issues. We still need more clinicians," Sampson, the medical director, said. "We're kind of walking a tightrope.

"A full-time doctor is really needed. We have to do the best we can with a patchwork of doctors."

Sampson, who worked at Bond for six years before opening his own practice, regards the south-side clinic as far more stable than NHS.

"They're better funded than we are," he said. "They've turned the corner — we haven't."

Wiggins, who turns 61 later this month, still practices law in order to make ends meet. He's the first to admit he didn't really know what he was getting himself into, despite being a longtime NHS board member.

"This is a very hard job. I was stunned at how much I didn't know," Wiggins said. "You have to trust the process, and you have to trust the people.

"The pieces were there, the folks were here," he added. "Everybody's working hard. We just had to get out of our own way.

"I'd like to think we just got our groove back."

Additional Facts

Block Party

NHS is holding a 35th anniversary "block party" from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, July 25, at the clinic at 438 W. Brevard St. (entrance on Macomb). Pam Laws is scheduled to perform. Free blood-pressure screenings will be offered.
