

Tallahassee's Neighborhood Medical Center has opened a new facility in Havana

Written by TaMaryn Waters Democrat staff writer
Aug. 21, 2013 |

tallahassee.com

HAVANA —Being healthy is a luxury for most residents who call rural Gadsden County home.

Unsettling yet true, men and women die in their 30s from diabetes and preventable diseases. Some walk around not knowing they're moments away from a stroke, despite constant unchecked headaches. Havana children, injured or ill, often only get medical care when they step in a school nurse's office since the nearest clinic or hospital is in neighboring Quincy or Tallahassee, roughly 15 miles away.

Havana, in particular, has no public transportation to those cities. That causes working families and low-income seniors to forgo seeing a doctor until an acute medical condition stops them in their tracks.



Oretha Jones, executive director of Neighborhood Medical Center, loads supplies at the grand opening of the Havana branch on Saturday. TOP: From left, nurse practitioner Alanna Steaple and Dr. Mai Kung fill bags. / Photos by Michael Schwarz/Special to the Democrat

Oretha Jones grew up in Gadsden County. She knows the bleak conditions all too well.

For three years, Jones has worked behind the scenes with a dedicated army of concerned residents, healthcare professionals and partners to bring basic health care services to Gadsden County.

That day has come.

Tallahassee-based Neighborhood Medical Center, located in the heart of Frenchtown on Brevard Street, has opened a new full medical facility to fill a gaping healthcare void, offering everything from exams to mental health counseling to medication management. The 1,061-square-foot facility, located on East Sixth Avenue near the Havana Community Park off Main Street, had a grand opening Saturday to get the word out about the new clinic in town.

“The need is huge,” said Jones, executive director of Neighborhood Medical Center. “We really want people to know we are here to help the community.”

The facility, which mirrors services at NMC in Tallahassee, became a welcomed reality as a result of partnerships with the Florida State College of Medicine, FSU College of Nursing, Gadsden County Health Department, Gadsden County School Board, the Havana Health and Wellness Council and the town of Havana.

Early on, Chattahoochee was scouted as an area for Neighborhood Medical Center's expansion, but changes in the Health Department's administration prolonged the process. Still, the need remained and the Havana Health and Wellness Council approached the center again for assistance.

“It was the right time. They had the location. The (Havana) Wellness Council embraced us and we came here,” Jones said.

Now the Health Department is allowing the center to occupy half of its Sixth Avenue Building at minimal costs. The facility is not a free clinic, but services will be provided based on a sliding scale fee. Jones notes, though, that no one will be turned away.

For Jones, this mission is personal. Several of her loved ones, including her mother, died prematurely due to diseases or ailments she believes could have been caught in time if more medical care was accessible in Gadsden County —one of the poorest counties in Florida, the latest U.S. Census report shows.

Information reports from the Florida Health Department indicate Gadsden County ranks higher than the state’s average rate in:

- Heart failure
- Hypertension
- Breast cancer
- Prostate cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Diabetes
- Asthma

Now staffers and officials are spending coming weeks and months getting the word out about the new facility. Matt Thro, a Havana Town Council member and board member for the Havana Health and Wellness Center’s Board of Directors, said the new facility is “game changing and life changing.”

“The people who know about it are very excited about it,” he said.

Havana, with a population of roughly 1,750 residents —which is less than the high-school populations of Tallahassee’s Chiles, Leon and Lincoln schools —doesn’t have a directory of doctors on hand. It has one practicing physician, Dr. Mark Newberry, a stone’s throw from the new facility, and getting an appointment is tough for many residents.

Newberry said he has a “number” of Medicaid and Medicare patients currently but he said his office is not accepting new patients on Medicaid. As the town’s only doctor, he’s got a full plate.

“We still take some new patients from time to time,” Newberry said. “We are just not accepting all new patients because we already have a pretty full schedule.”

Shirley Aaron, 72, is one of Newberry’s patients. Even though healthcare for her is an appointment away, she’s thrilled and relieved to see Neighborhood Medical Center’s presence in Havana.

She remembers hearing an impassioned speech by Dr. Maggie Blackburn, current president of the Florida Coalition for School-Based Health Care, at a school board meeting about two school-based health sites in Quincy. Aaron realized then Havana needed the same thing.

“By looking at the school-based population, it was obvious that was not enough,” said Aaron, who teamed up early on with Blackburn and Gail Bellamy, FSU professor and director of the Center for Rural Health Research and Policy. “We saw more and more parents of children who were really, really in need of medical service and had no transportation and little money.”

She’s convinced the new facility will be the difference between life and death for so many, especially poor families.

“I see people all the time walking around and you can tell there’s something wrong with their backs or something wrong with their knees,” she added.

The thought of Gadsden County residents dying young gives Aaron goose bumps.