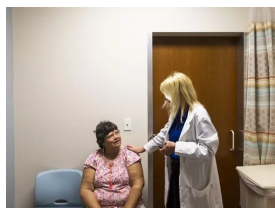


Two medical entities come together to serve seniors in East Naples

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(Photo: Nicole Raucheisen/Naples Daily News)

Loretta Zimmerman was in a bind after running out of her blood pressure medication.

Mounting worry wasn't going to help. She called Friendship Health Center in East Naples and got a next-day appointment, practically unheard of in most medical settings nowadays.

The 56-year-old works the front desk at a local hotel and has bare-bones insurance through her job. Zimmerman is mindful of how one physical a year is covered and out-of-pocket expenses kick in after that.

She saw the advanced registered nurse practitioner earlier this week and learned she could get her medication much cheaper through the center.

"I can get 90 days cheaper than what I was paying for 30 days at Walmart," Zimmerman said. "How about that? My blood pressure just went down."

Friendship Health Center, at 2355 Stanford Court off Airport-Pulling Road, is two separate medical entities under one roof, with a shared mission of serving the needy.

The two groups are the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida and Senior Friendship Health Center. The 6,000-square foot complex opened in January 2016 with 12 medical exam rooms and three dental rooms. The shared site is for patients 50 and older only.



Dr. Bruce Novark, DDS, right, and Dr. Donnie Rooksberry, DDS, operate on a patient's teeth at the Friendship Health Center in East Naples on Tuesday, July 11, 2017. (Photo: Nicole Raucheisen/Naples Daily News)

An open house is scheduled for Wednesday, Aug. 16, from 9 a.m. to noon in recognition of National Health Center Week. Health screenings will be offered.

The Healthcare Network provides primary care services, and Senior Friendship offers specialty care and dental services. All services are available on a sliding-scale fee for uninsured patients, based on their income eligibility. Medicare and Medicaid are accepted.

Prescription discounts are possible because the Healthcare Network, which has 20 other locations in Collier for all age groups, is a federally qualified clinic that can provide prescriptions for pennies on the dollar to patients.

Andrea Wichterich, 54, a part-time resident from Cologne, Germany, had a first appointment last week to establish herself as a patient and was pleased by her first impression. She went to the center based on a recommendation from a friend.

"They make you feel at ease," she said. "They are very, very nice people. It's great."

The Healthcare Network has four medical providers at the shared location. Senior Friendship has 40 mostly retired physicians and dentists who volunteer their time. Senior Friendship closed its previous location at 2171 Pine Ridge Road after the new location in East Naples opened.

Although the two groups operate separately, the shared location provides efficiency in space utilization against scarce health care dollars for nonprofit and charitable organizations. For patients with a spectrum of medical needs, it's easier for them to visit one location. Public transportation is nearby.

"It's nice the left hand knows what the right hand is doing," said Kathy Nicklaus, the office manager. "We work very, very well together."

Most patients have low incomes and pay \$25 to \$50 for an office visit, based on what they qualify for on a sliding-scale fee, she said. Patients tend to work in day labor industries, in hospitality services, restaurants and other jobs that do not provide benefits.

The Friendship Health side of the clinic serves 1,500 patients. Its 2017 budget is \$870,344, and it currently is not billing any insurance, according to staff reports.

The Healthcare Network side has seen 565 patients since opening, and that is steadily increasing, with an annual budget of \$773,529. At least 363 of the patients to date were uninsured.

The needs among the uninsured, especially those 50 and older, will continue to grow, according to a study last year by the Community Foundation of Collier County.

The foundation found 17 percent of adults could not see a doctor due to cost and 20 percent of the population ages 55 to 64 had no insurance.



Daniel Pino talks through forms with Andrea Wichterich, 54, of Cologne, after her wellness check-up appointment at the Friendship Health Center in East Naples on Tuesday, July 11, 2017. (Photo: Nicole Raucheisen/Naples Daily News)

In August, Nicklaus said a couple of fourth-year medical students from Florida State University will spend a semester doing a geriatric rotation at the center under the guidance of Dr. Michael Gloth, a Naples physician. He is a faculty member with FSU's College of Medicine at its geriatrics division and a part-time physician with the healthcare network.

The FSU medical student program initially began in Immokalee several years ago through the Healthcare Network to help address primary care needs, and the program has grown in popularity.

It is one of several regional programs that FSU has around the state but the Naples/Immokalee program consistently gets high ratings among the students, Gloth said.

“It is not only that they learn a great deal about taking care of older adults, but they gain a very positive perspective about the senior population and the complexity of care,” Gloth said. “It quickly becomes apparent to them that geriatrics is quite different from internal medicine or family practice. The benefit to these older adults is obvious to these students very quickly.”

Ultimately, the hope is that some of the students will decide to go into geriatrics and some may be interested in coming back to the area to establish their practices, he said.

“Within the next three years, Collier County will start to see some of these physicians entering the medical workforce in our area,” he said.