

Free “medical” clinics are vital to South Carolina’s well-being

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FREE CLINICS provide quality healthcare to those who would otherwise go without

By W. Thomas Smith Jr.

CAMDEN, S.C. – It is an unsung, little-known fact that the 40-plus and growing number of free “medical care” clinics across South Carolina provide tens-of-millions of dollars of free healthcare services to uninsured or underinsured individuals and families annually: Last year, \$110-million to be exact.

That’s a staggering figure to be sure. But physicians and other medical professionals who regularly provide the free care for their patients are quick to point out that “quality affordable or free healthcare for low-income individuals and families is not only important to those individuals and families; it is vital for the overall well-being of any society.”

As the late British Prime Minister Sir Winston S. Churchill said, “Healthy citizens are the greatest asset any country can have.” And that’s been the goal of South Carolina’s free clinics and the supporting South Carolina Free Clinic Association (SCFCA) since the association’s inception in 2001.

Free clinics – all of which are independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations (as is the SCFCA) – provide quality services ranging from traditional general medical services, to oral health, specialty services, referrals, lab testing, diagnostic procedures, health education and prevention, as well as prescription medications.

Last year alone, those services were provided to nearly 40,000 patients across the Palmetto State requiring more than 268,000 volunteer hours from physicians, nurses, dentists, lab techs, pharmacists and others.

Though founded in 2001, in January the SCFCA will celebrate its 10-year anniversary as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and, “qualitatively speaking, an immeasurable value to the state,” says Virginia Ann Mullikin, counsel to the SCFCA. “We can never put a price on what free clinics have meant to those who would otherwise be without quality healthcare.”

Grant funds from supporters such as the BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina Foundation, supplemented by individual and group donations have historically served as the core component of the free clinics’ annual budgets. Unlike many other safety net providers, free clinics do not receive federal funding. Free clinics rely on grant funding, community donations (both monetary and in-kind), and volunteer services to provide free medical services to their patients. Each of the SCFCA’s member clinics request funds from community sources, such as corporations and non-profits (like the United Way), churches, hospitals, and a growing number of individual donors.

And every little bit helps. A contribution of \$220.00 will, on average, sponsor a patient for an entire year at a free clinic in South Carolina.

For more information, please visit the S.C. Free Clinic Association at <https://www.southcarolinafc.org/>.

