

# S.C. Free Clinic Association holds annual conference

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**Volunteer physicians, other medical professionals gather at Columbia's Hilton Hotel**

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COLUMBIA, S.C. – The South Carolina Free Clinic Association (SCFCA) – representing 41 free clinics statewide – held its annual conference at the Columbia Hilton Center Hotel, Jan. 29-31, 2018.

A three-day gathering of volunteer physicians, administrators, other medical professionals, and those who support the same; the conference addressed fundraising initiatives and public awareness through social media with additional discussions ranging from free clinics nationally to the challenge of eligibility guidelines in free clinics. A panel discussion with local business leaders and moderated by WIS-TV's Dawndy Mercer Plank posed the primary question: "What if the free clinics were not there?" And attendees shared "best practices" and new physician-patient models during breaks between sessions.

"We've established what we refer to as a 'circle of caring,'" says Dr. Raymond L. Cox, a retired physician and former hospital chair who today serves as executive director of Volunteers in Medicine, a free clinic on Hilton Head Island. "We have a community of retired medical professionals who want to continue serving the community, and a community of uninsured or underinsured who need quality medical care."

The 41 free clinics at 46 sites across the Palmetto State operate under a similar philosophy. And the proof is in the numbers.

In 2017, S.C.'s free clinics provided more than \$100-million in free healthcare services to 40,000 uninsured or underinsured individuals and families.

How was that money spent? More than 114,600 medical visits were provided on-site, not including nearly 13,160 on-site dental visits. Behavioral/mental health visits were more than 5,770. More than 32,300 patients received enabling services (non-clinical services such as health education and case management), and nearly 349,000 necessary prescriptions were dispensed. None of this begins to cover expenses associated with operating and administrative costs, much less the 4,183 volunteers providing 258,399 hours-worth of free services.

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.

According to Cox and others, free clinics not only benefit the patients and their families, but there are the added benefits of keeping medical costs down (fewer emergency room visits by uninsured patients when their illnesses or injuries may not be emergencies) and increasing worker productivity statewide. After all, a healthy workforce is a more productive workforce.

"Free clinics are an immeasurable value to South Carolina," 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."

Free clinics are one of S.C.'s best-kept secrets, though the association hopes to change that by way of a renewed awareness campaign through a more-dynamic social media presence [Visit the S.C. Free Clinic Association facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/scfreeclinics/>] and forthcoming fundraising efforts and events.

Free clinics – all of which are independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations – 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.

The SCFCA, also a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, provides training and technical assistance, research, resource development and advocacy to free clinics, statewide.