Mom and Me mobile clinic offers free medical care to everyone

By Ray Miller-Still
Editor

Editor's note: The "Community Consciousness" focus page will run once a month in the third issue of every month. If you would like to suggest a nonprofit or individual to focus on, email rstill@courierherald.com.

Health care — it's a national conversation that's sure to be prominent in the upcoming political races.

But while Democrats, Republicans, and Independents debate over how a health care system should work nationwide, Dale Clark and his team of volunteer doctors and nurses will continue to offer their vision of health care: free of cost, or as close to it as possible.

Clark is the co-founder of the nonprofit Mom And Me Mobile Medical Clinic, which travels around King and Pierce counties providing myriad free services to anyone who needs care.

"It's everybody's right to have medical services," he said in an interview inside one of his mobile clinics. "It's not a privilege."

The idea for a mobile medical clinic came to Clark and his wife Ladeanna after a friend of theirs — a single mother — died of Stage 4 breast cancer at the age of 38.

Clark blames the health care system for failing this woman and her family, so he and Ladeanna formed the nonprofit organization in 2012 to begin raising money for a trailer that would be converted into a mobile doctor's office.

"It was a slow start. We didn't have a lot of support behind us — our fundraising were car washes and yard sales and sitting outside Rose's IGA with a little collection jar until they had enough money to buy a truck and trailer," said Lori Elgner, Clark's business partner.

The Clarks and Elgner's hard work paid off after four long years, and Mom and Me's first mobile clinic rolled onto the streets in 2016.

Since then, their Buckley-based operation has grown, and the clinic now visits Auburn, Spanaway, Eatonville, Graham, Orting, Randle, Lakewood, and other cities.

Part of that growth was the Mom and Me Thrift Store on Enumclaw's Cole Street, which moved there from a more remote location in town in 2016.

Clark isn't a medical doctor (though he has a doctorate in business and a master's in counseling psychology) so the clinic is staffed with half a dozen doctors and about a dozen nurses, all volunteers.

"Up in Eatonville where we go, Dr. Van Eaton — the town is named after his family — he's the MD in that location," Clark said. "If we go to Graham, Dennis Hayes, a PA, he's up there. If we're doing a school district, we have a [pediatrician] that comes all the way from Portland."

During a mobile health care clinic event at the Puyallup Nazarene Church — where the Mom and Me clinic was one of several offering services to low-income and homeless individuals and families — Jen Buckingham, a physicians assistant, and Deidre Mance, a nurse practitioner student from the Plateau, were the two volunteers on duty.

"I'm just here because I have a specific skill set people need," Buckingham said. "This is refreshing for me, because it's not about making money… this is just about giving the gift of health care, and not having any second gain for it."

"This is what we go to school for, to help people and take care of them," Mance added.

The volunteers will see anyone, regardless of age and insurance, but Clark said there are three groups they see the most.

Dale Clark, second to the far left, is speaking with another volunteer during a June 14 Project Homeless Connect event at Puyallup's Nazarene Church. Dale himself is no stranger to how expensive the U.S.'s healthcare system is, since he has survived cancer three times, and his wife has other severe medical issues. Photo by Ray Miller-Still

"We're seeing veterans who are tired of VA, seniors that have received a letter that said, 'you're no longer a patient at our clinic' ("Or just can't afford the copays," Elgner said), or young families that have these catastrophic care plans that cost $5,000, $6,000, or $7,000 — you have to pay for this before you get anything — and they can't afford it," Clark said, referring to a type of medical health coverage under the Affordable Care Act that allows families to have lower monthly premiums on their plans, but have to pay for all health-care costs until a multi-thousand deductible limit is reached.

There are various services these volunteers can perform, like basic first aid, physicals for both young kids and adults, and antibiotic prescriptions.

"Anything you'd go to urgent care for, they (our volunteer doctors) can address," Elgner said.

However, services that require any lab tests or X-rays are done by other providers, and clients will be billed for those, though the Mom and Me clinic will do their best to help mitigate costs, especially for uninsured patients, Clark said.

Also, none of the doctors prescribe pain medications.

"We don't do pain meds. We don't do any of that," Clark said. "Doing pain meds is a slippery slope — you don't even want to get involved with that."

Abortion services are also not offered.

"We are about preserving life.

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Medical

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That's what we focus on," Clark said. "If a woman is pregnant and she comes here and she wants information, we send her to Care Net. They'll give her an ultrasound and information about options, and I know the option of abortion will come up."

According to Care Net's national and local websites, the nonprofit is a pro-life, Christian-based organization and does not provide or refer patients for birth control or abortion services.

But even without proving more expensive services to their clientele, costs to keep the clinic open and mobile are high.

"All our money goes to insurance and the upkeep of the RVs," Elgner said.

"But we have one gold ring, and that gold ring is the State of Washington. For providers that volunteer, they will pay their malpractice insurance," Clark continued. "That's why you see free clinics around — without the Legislature doing that for us, we couldn't do it."

The Mom and Me Mobile Clinic actually have another ace-in-the-hole when it comes to being able to afford offering free services and helping patients lower or eliminate other health-care costs.

His name is Terry Cullinane, and he's the guy to go to when you need help covering the costs of outside services.

Cullinane helps connect clinic clients with state programs or nonprofit grants that help cover costs for issues like transportation, continuing dental, vision, and hearing care, medication co-pays, and expensive treatments.

"People on Medicaid, their medicine costs are manageable. It's the people that are above Medicaid that are getting hammered," he said. "One of my first sales calls in this business, I was sitting across the table of this woman whose income was $1,500. The maximum you can make as a single [person] on Medicaid is around $1,300. She was spending $800 a month on her insulin.

"That story is all too common," Cullinane continued. "People are dying because they're not taking their meds, or their rationing their insulin and losing limbs because of it… No one should have to make those choices."

According to a review in the Annals of Internal Medicine, between 20 and 30 percent of prescriptions go unfilled every year, in large part due to cost, and causes an estimated 125,000 deaths, contributes to 10 percent of all hospitalizations, and costs between $100 and $289 billion annually.

But that doesn't have to be the case.

"There's an enormous amount of help in the private sector for medicine, but people don't know how or where to look," Cullinane said. "My role is, either I help people with their medicines or I help them get resources."

One resource he uses is the Patient Access Network (PAN) Foundation, a national nonprofit that awards grants to people to use for out-of-pocket medication costs associated with 67 different diseases and conditions.

For example, the PAN Foundation is currently offering grants for people with asthma — a $1,600 per year grant to cover co-pay costs for 85 separate medications, to be exact.

But there is a laundry list of prerequisites, and the grant is only for a patient that is currently getting treated for asthma; already has Medicare insurance that covers the medication they use; that this same medication is already on PAN's list of covered medication; that the patient must fall at or below 400 percent of the federal poverty level; and that the patient needs to live in the U.S. or one of its territories (but does not have to be a citizen).

Additionally, the foundation works on a first come, first serve basis, Cullinane said, and it's not guaranteed any grant program will be open for new or returning patients.

While the Mom and Me Mobile Clinic is currently just focusing on medical care, Clark's big dream is to open a permanent free clinic somewhere in Buckley that would not only provide medical services, but dental and vision care too, as well as host a food bank and a thrift store to help financially support the operation.

But the clinic is a long way from that goal, and at the moment, Clark is looking for ways just to keep the mobile clinic on the road and expand their services.

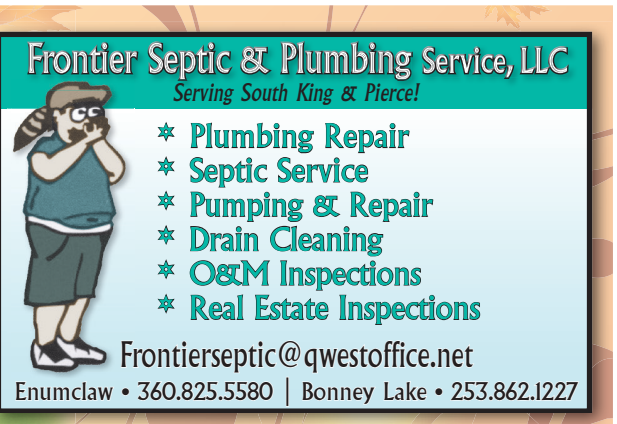
"We need a guy… that might know how to market," Clark said. "That's one of my big goals, is to find somebody who knows how to market and write grants."

The clinic also needs drivers. Luckily, several of the mobile clinics are refurbished RVs, and drivers wouldn't need a special license to operate them. Volunteer forms can be found at the Mom and Me Thrift Store.

Those who can't put in the hours, though, can donate to the clinic by going online to www.momandmemobile.org/donate/, or donate or shop at the thrift store.

You can also visit the clinic's calendar at www. momandmemobile.org/calendar/ to find out where Clark's team will be next. The next time the clinic expects to be in Buckley is July 27 at the Buckley Public Market from 10 a.m. to noon, but the calendar is subject to change and updates.

For more information, call 360-367-6992 or fill out a an online "Contact Us" form at www.momandmemobile.org/contact/.-



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