



# Health care needs mount

## Charlotte demands access to low-cost medication

By **GARY ROBERTS, STAFF WRITER**

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MURDOCK — Charlotte County is putting pressure on Family Health Centers of Southwest Florida to improve pharmacy services to needy residents in its role as a federally qualified health center.

As an FQHC, Family Health Centers is supposed to provide primary care services to indigent residents, including low-cost medical and pharmacy services. To perform this task, FHC is able to buy medications at a significant discount.

However, FHC requires patients to fill these prescriptions at its Fort Myers pharmacy, an inconvenient, if not impossible, commute for those with limited resources.

“We have a real problem,” Commissioner Chris Constance said at last week’s county workshop. “Family Health Centers is only doing half the job.”

FHC representatives were invited to the meeting but did not show, and did not respond to repeated interview requests for this article.

However, a delegation from Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic did attend the session. Rob Wellins, pharmacy director, said the free clinic also is concerned about uninsured patients’ access to affordable medications through FHC.

“That’s what those federal dollars are meant for, but they are not using those dollars effectively,” Wellins said.

The Port Charlotte clinic currently is filling FHC prescriptions for the poor and uninsured, he said. In just the last three months, 400 prescriptions have been referred to the free clinic from FHC, which amounts to about 15 percent of the clinic’s total. The Andes clinic filled 11,000 prescriptions last year.

Family Health Centers is able to buy medications up to 75 percent cheaper than the free clinic, Wellins said, but will not extend the FQHC pricing to the clinic. Furthermore, the overall cost of the most popular generic drugs has skyrocketed 448 percent in just the last two years, “which puts all free clinics at risk,” he said. Even the Virginia B. Andes Pharmacy, which is open limited hours, cannot meet the need.

“If we were open 40 hours a week, demand would double,” Wellins said. “A lot of people go without their medication because they can’t get here.”

Possible solutions would be to have the FHC pharmacy in Fort Myers transport medications to the Port Charlotte clinic for delivery to patients, Wellins said. Another option would be for FHC to contract with Walgreens or Publix pharmacies for the convenience of patients.

Ultimately, however, the Andes clinic wants to form its own nonprofit retail community pharmacy, providing free prescriptions to qualified patients as an FQHC. But this unique plan, 18 months in the planning, still needs more community partners.

The lack of service doesn't end with medications, though. On the medical side, uninsured patients also are not receiving the level of care they should be receiving, said Andes clinic CEO Suzanne Roberts. Uninsured patients at Family Health Centers face an extended wait just to get appointments, she said, adding that insured patients don't have the same delays. "When we start turning these patients away, they will end up in ERs (emergency rooms) or without care," she said. "There are significant health issues. From our standpoint, it's out of control."

Wellins surmises that Family Health Center, a private, profit-oriented company that signed up to become Charlotte's FQHC just last year, is still learning how to make the numbers work.

"They didn't know what they were in for," Wellins said.

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