



Virginia B. Andes offers free mammograms to qualified patients

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According to the American Cancer Society, finding breast cancer early — before it has spread — is one of the key factors in beating the disease. Mammograms are believed to be the best way to detect breast cancer, especially in the early stages. Even women who perform self-exams regularly often cannot feel the small lump that is growing deep in the breast, but chances are good that a mammogram will detect it.

Mammograms are usually covered by insurance as a preventive service. But women who are uninsured and can't afford to pay for it themselves often go without the mammogram, putting themselves at risk.

Now, the Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic has announced it can provide more mammograms, screenings and other tools for the women and men who need them, thanks to *Susan G. Komen* of Southwest Florida and *Project Detect* of Port Charlotte.

Susan G. Komen has provided a grant for initial screenings, diagnostic mammograms and some additional procedures. The Riverwood Country Club Ladies' Golf Association adopted the clinic and has raised more than \$200,000 for the clinic during the past three years.

"Most of the money comes from people at Riverwood, through our fundraisers," said Nancy Tiernan, president of the board. "And we give all of it to the clinic. We don't keep any for administration or other costs."

The group holds neighborhood giving programs, golf tournaments, dances, raffles, casino nights, silent auctions and other events.

To qualify for the clinic's services, people must meet these criteria:

- be Charlotte County residents, 18 years or older;
- meet income guidelines;
- and not have Medicare.

When calling the clinic, ask for a free mammogram. The caller will receive an appointment to determine eligibility and complete a breast health initiative. Then Nursing Director Cindy Neads and Karen Honstein, the breast health navigator, will review the information and, if eligible, arrange for a mammogram at one of their partner facilities — Advanced Imaging, Bayfront Health Port Charlotte, Bayfront Health Punta Gorda and Fawcett Memorial Hospital.

Honstein, a registered nurse with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, helps people navigate through the health care process. If additional screenings are needed — whether a diagnostic mammogram, ultrasound, MRI, PET scan, CT or needle scan biopsy — these are also scheduled and paid by the Komen grant. When surgery is called for, the clinic turns to partners Florida Cancer Center, 21st Century Oncology or Moffitt Cancer Center. They provide in-kind services, with the surgery completed by doctors who donate their time and expertise.

"We guide them every step of the way," said Honstein. "It's not a difficult process, but it can be overwhelming to someone who is unfamiliar with it and newly diagnosed."

Breast cancer survivor Mary Hajney was one such woman. After paying nearly \$400 out of her own pocket for her routine mammogram, where a lump was detected, she then paid for a diagnostic mammogram. When a needle biopsy was recommended, she could not afford it. So she turned to the Virginia B. Andes Clinic. She had a lumpectomy and two nodes removed, followed by chemotherapy that would have cost \$8,000 per treatment without the clinic's partnerships.

Like all women who come to the clinic, Hajney was given a "Hope" bag, handmade by women for Susan G. Komen. It was filled with a blanket, hat, mastectomy pillow and many other helpful and comforting items.

"Where would I be without Virginia B. Andes Clinic?" Hajney shook her head. "The people who support Susan G. Komen and Project Detect may not realize how precious their time and dollars are. I am so humbled by the many giving people who helped."

For a free mammogram, call the Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic at **941-766-9570** or stop in at 21297 Olean Blvd. in Port Charlotte.