



PRIZES FOR PROGRESS

Second Place Winner

Free Clinic of the New River Valley

The Free Clinic of the New River Valley is THRILLED to prepare and submit this nomination for the VHCF “Prizes for Progress!” When the opportunity was announced, we knew that this was our chance to take a fond look at our past and also to show gratitude to our wonderful partner of 22 years—the Virginia Health Care Foundation.

It has taken the collective historical memories (and old paper files) of three people looking back over 22 years to piece together our mutual story. What a trip it has been! When we think of where we were when we received our very first VHCF grant, and compare that to where we are today, it makes us pause and stand amazed. It’s hard to put into words the significance of an understanding, dedicated, collaborative partner, who has stuck by your side for so long. Yes, the grant money has been invaluable. But, it’s the people behind the relationship that have made the most difference—the technical expertise, involvement, guidance, encouragement, and conviction that came our way from the leadership of VHCF.

Our partnership with VHCF began in 1994, when our organization was a small free clinic. We had one site that was open only one night per week for medical walk-in appointments, and one dental chair that was shared by a cadre of 2-3 volunteer dentists. We were housed in a tiny, borrowed space that we reconfigured for our clinic night. That first grant funded an important program that allowed local physicians to volunteer in their own offices to serve our free clinic patients. That initiative proved to enhance our reputation in our community, and allowed us to begin to garner a large group of volunteer practitioners, who would be the backbone of our practice for the coming decade.

Over the next few years our Dental Program really took root under another VHCF grant to support a part-time staff Dentist and Dental Assistant. This model eventually became an early VHCF “Model that Made It.” We were very proud of our accomplishment, and especially proud that our model was being replicated throughout the Commonwealth thanks to VHCF.

Fasten your seatbelts! Fast forward seven years. The clinic obtained a large, newly renovated facility. In 2005, Amy Forsyth-Stephens became our Executive Director and she had an ambitious agenda to fill our new space with patients. With the support of VHCF, she grew the clinic into a full-time operation, hiring our first staff Nurse Practitioner. She also created a formal consortium of the three New River Valley charitable clinics, leading the way for a future

merger of the Pro Bono Counseling Program and the Free Clinic of the NRV. This was groundbreaking behavioral health integration before it was the standard of care. In addition, a second satellite site was opened in rural Giles County with the support of a federal HRSA grant. The number of annual unduplicated patients grew from 800 to nearly 3,000 over those few years.

When Michelle Brauns was promoted to Executive Director in 2008, the organization was strongly supported by members of the community and highly respected by stakeholders and partners. The clinic was central to the health care safety net of the entire New River Valley. Michelle nurtured our partnership with VHCF, successfully replicating the VHCF Nurse Practitioner model in the new Giles County satellite clinic.

Michelle also secured VHCF support for important strategic planning during this time of growth, and for more HRSA grant writing. The HRSA grants began to flow, thanks in part to the stewardship of VHCF in underwriting the significant costs of preparing those federal grant applications.

Most recently, VHCF helped the clinic implement a groundbreaking behavioral health/primary care integration program which allowed staff and volunteers to work closely together with the clinic's medical practitioners. The flexibility and technical assistance provided by VHCF staff was paramount during the planning of this ambitious project, and continued to strengthen the program until just last year when it became sustainable.

Today, we are happy to report that we are no longer a free clinic but have grown and matured into a federally-funded Community Health Center, having won two (2013, 2017) highly competitive HRSA New Access Point awards. We have three full-time sites, serving Montgomery County (Christiansburg) Giles County (Pearisburg), and most recently, Pulaski County/Radford City (Dublin). We offer primary care and integrated behavioral health services at all sites, and dental services at Christiansburg (five operatories) and Giles (three operatories). Our budget has grown from \$225,000 in 1994 to \$3.3 million and staff went from six to 49.

Most importantly, we can document the tremendous impact that our Health Center makes on the health indicators of our residents. According to our tracked Clinical Performance Measures, we are now out-performing a majority of Health Centers in Virginia. For example, at our Health Center **89 percent** of all medical patients are screened for depression and a follow-up plan created if indicated. The average across Virginia is 47 percent, and the national average is 51 percent. Clearly, the investment made by VHCF has paid off in the most important of ways—better health for our vulnerable residents!

This has always been a team effort. We want to underscore this: Time after time, the grant funds that we have received from VHCF have given us the tangible resources needed to take the next step forward, the next growth spurt, the next quality improvement. But, an even greater benefit has been the steady flow of intangibles made possible by Debbie Oswalt and her talented staff: the expertise shared at site visits, the clinical roundtables hosted for our practitioners, the trainings for our behavioral health professionals, the advocacy in Richmond, and the formal and informal information sharing that happens naturally and continuously.

VHCF understood the potential we held as a small free clinic, and has nudged us toward excellence for over two decades. We owe them much gratitude and will forever hold and protect our partnership and shared vision for equitable access to health care for all Virginians.

Footnote: If we do win a “Prizes for Progress” cash award, we will put every dollar of prize money into our new Patient Assistance Fund, which was developed to use for patients when they cannot afford their sliding scale fee for a health care visit. The Fund provides support for patients in each of our services – primary care, dental and behavioral health. It also assists those in the VHCF-supported The Pharmacy Connection program. It’s our way of insuring that no one has a financial barrier to care.