



Laramie's Downtown Clinic has cared for thousands

# Community Gives Time, Treasure to Help the Most Needy

BY RACHEL GIRT

**G**enerosity from over 800 volunteers, including doctors and nurses, combined with community financial support has kept the Downtown Clinic doors open for 22 years, providing free healthcare to over 9,000 people in Laramie.

"We think that free healthcare should be high quality and innovative," said Pete Gosar, executive director for the Downtown Clinic. "We're so grateful that our medical team agrees with that, and they're willing to go the extra mile."

The Downtown Clinic has grown since Mary Burman, PhD, nurse practitioner and former dean of the University of Wyoming Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing, and Diana Esteve, nurse and former Albany County Public Health director, opened it in 1999. The nurses, along with help from Daniel Klein, MD, founded the clinic to address the unmet need for healthcare for low-income, uninsured individuals in Laramie.

For its first eight years, the clinic operated once a week out of the Albany County Public Health building in downtown Laramie. Public Health closed early on Wednesday, allowing the clinic volunteers to set up and take walk-ins for non-emergency care. The clinic closed after everyone had been seen.

"The clinic has progressed from being reactive when I first started to becoming a very proactive medical clinic," said Michael Comly, MD.

Dr. Comly started volunteering at the clinic in 2003 after making a promise to his partner Dr. Klein, who was very sick at the time and later passed away. Now retired from the practice, Dr. Comly follows a whole set of clients at the clinic.

Today, the clinic is open three days a week in its own building, next to Public Health, offering primary and specialty care, counseling, social work, dental and vision referrals and free medicine through an onsite pharmacy.

All the doctors, pharmacists, counselors, nurse practitioners, social workers and nurses volunteer their time to see people, Pete Gosar explained. The clinic operates with the help of two full-time employees and co-medical directors (a part-time physician, and nurse practitioners who are paid for administration but volunteer their time to see clients), a

physician assistant and two pharmacy managers.

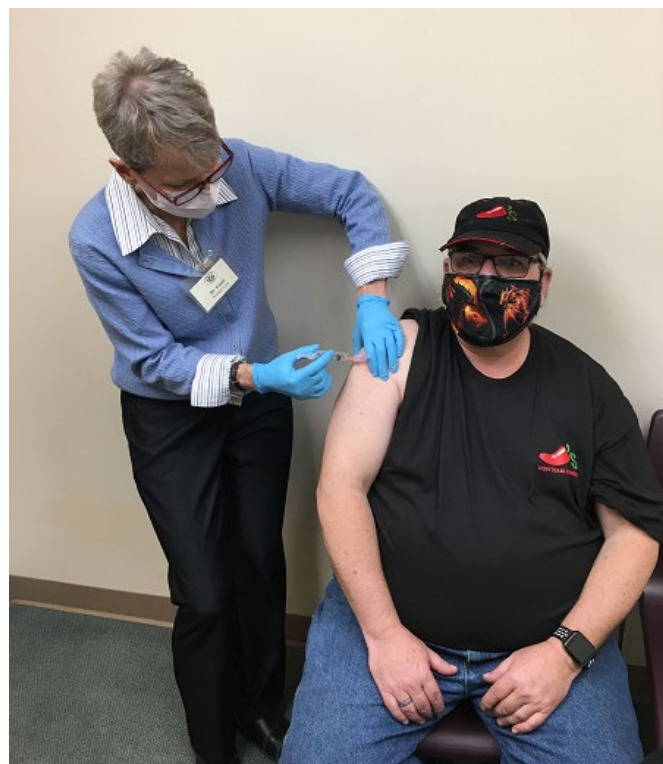
Many volunteers are students from UW, usually enrolled in health sciences, pharmacy, counseling and social work.

"Whether it's a 30-year doctor or a second-year pharmacy school student, I feel grateful for them and their willingness to come week after week, year after year," Pete Gosar said.

Grace Gosar, MD, co-medical director for the clinic and Pete's sister, called the students a "fantastic asset."

"We have a regular influx of folks who are in development towards their profession and come with a lot of enthusiasm and some really interesting ideas," Dr. Gosar said.

Two UW pharmacy students run the onsite pharmacy and



Dr. Grace Gosar administers a COVID-19 vaccination at the clinic. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE LARAMIE DOWNTOWN CLINIC

are overseen by a volunteer pharmacist. The clinic's pharmacy works with the medical team to discuss the best treatment options. The prescribed medications then are gifted to the clients.

"We felt that it's important to remove that financial barrier of having to decide whether to buy medicine or food for their family," Dr. Gosar said.

Two additional volunteers are dedicated to obtaining donations of branded medications like insulin and inhalers that the clinic and clients cannot typically afford.

"Our diabetic clients are getting the insulin that they actually need, not what they can afford," Dr. Gosar added. "We're getting the options we want as clinicians and the best possible for our clients."

Community support for the clinic has been quite comprehensive. The clinic receives imaging services from Iverson Memorial Hospital and discounted lab services from Wyomed Laboratory. Nutritionists and orthopedists have volunteered to help clients. Local churches make food for volunteers and clients. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a local gym even opened its doors for clinic clients to work out.

The clinic provides free healthcare to about 500 individuals annually who have no health insurance and are at less than 175% of the federal poverty level. UW students, children and those eligible for Medicare or Medicaid are not eligible. Clients range in age from over 18 to under 65.

Through fundraising, donated services and grants, the clinic can provide primary care, medications and even some specialty care for about \$800 a year, Pete Gosar said.

The Downtown Clinic serves a very mobile, diverse population, and the number of active clients can vary, depending upon what is happening in their lives, often following employment. About 20 percent of clients are native Spanish speakers. Some clients include family members of foreign UW graduate students who are not covered by insurance.

"More than half of our clients work and are not lazy," Dr. Gosar emphasized, wanting to dispel any stereotypes of those seeking free healthcare. "They don't get the luxury of laziness. They never eat if they are lazy. Some can't work because they are caring for others."

Dr. Gosar readily admitted to being very passionate about helping her clients. After being diagnosed with terminal cancer several years ago, she reevaluated how she wanted to spend her time. She closed her practice in Buffalo, eventually moving to Laramie and joining her brother Pete at the Downtown Clinic.

"I was intrigued to work with one of my family members and see what we could build," Dr. Gosar recalled.



The Downtown Clinic put on a mobile flu vaccine clinic at the Laramie Soup Kitchen in October.

She doesn't regret her decision. "This is one of the best medical organizations that I've ever worked in," she said.

What helps set the Downtown Clinic apart is the level of collaboration and innovative, comprehensive team-based care, Pete Gosar said. "We can make decisions based on what's in the best interest of the client's health, not what's going to be paid or what the insurance will cover."

During its weekly Monday Huddle, the clinical team disseminates information about clients, discussing challenges, medications and possible solutions. A full-time client care coordinator follows up on screenings, vaccinations and other services needed.

"I've never worked at a place that had such positive energy and was such a joy to come to work," said Ann Marie Hart, PhD, a nurse practitioner, UW professor and director of the Doctor of Nursing Program at the UW. "Nobody volunteers or works there who isn't committed to providing excellent care for our clientele."

Hart has volunteered at the clinic since 1999. Today, she serves as the clinic's co-medical director with Dr. Gosar and volunteers once a week.

"I'm very proud of where the clinic stands today, offering some of the best primary care services in southeastern Wyoming," she said.

"That being said, I'm sad that the clinic still needs to be in existence and that Wyoming hasn't passed Medicaid expansion to provide healthcare to low income, uninsured individuals," she added.