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Putting The ‘Care’ In Healthcare

Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative Delivers

BY STACIE ROSE

If you head to the Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative homepage, you will notice a statement that goes right to the heart of this non-profit organization. It asserts that healthcare is a right, not a privilege. BVMi delivers free healthcare to the working uninsured in Bergen County. It’s an organization that has been improving lives for 15 years through primary, preventative, chronic, urgent care, lab work, specialist care, case management services, and mental health treatment admin-

istered by staff and volunteer practitioners.

BVMi was established in 2009 by a group of doctors led by Dr. Sam Cassell as a Volunteers in Medicine model clinic designed to fill the void in healthcare. You may wonder how many working Bergen County residents are uninsured, and the numbers would likely surprise you.

Joanne Murad of BVMi explains that many people



would otherwise neglect their health or wind up in an emergency room, often for a non-emergency ailment in need of attention. This is problematic because emergency rooms are often overcrowded, and staff are overtaxed. It's also nearly impossible for a patient to receive the necessary follow-up care for a condition that may be chronic or in need of additional medical support.

“We believe in treating patients with dignity, respect, and compassion while providing the highest standard of medical care in Bergen County,” said President and CEO Amanda Missey.

BVMI currently has about 75 clinical doctors, nurses, and specialists who help administer care, and 75 administrative volunteers are ready to help. A full-service operation, BVMI sees patients five days a week in the clinic and via telehealth. A nurse practitioner on staff is available for phone consults and sick visits, helping to keep patients out of the emergency room.

“Every day at BVMI, we see the increasing demand for free, high-quality healthcare among those we serve, and we are growing in 2024 to meet that need,” said Missey.

It is estimated that 40,000 Bergen County adults could potentially qualify for BVMI. Today, BVMI serves more than 1,000 patients, many of whom are immigrants. BVMI patients work for low wages in the service sector and are people you see every day.

The medical practitioners at BVMI have diagnosed illnesses like diabetes and helped patients receive the medicines, care and lifestyle support needed for sustainable wellness. The organization provides gynecological care, including mammograms, to women who, in many cases, have never had this vital procedure. Breast cancer diagnoses and systematic treatment have been lifesaving for many women who have entrusted BVMI with their care.

The organization partners with local hospitals such as Englewood Health, Hackensack University Medical Center, Holy Name Medical Center, New Bridge Medical Center, and Valley Health System for diagnostic testing for patients. BVMI also has

fall through the cracks when it comes to healthcare. A large cross-section of people makes just enough money to cover housing, utilities, and food, but not enough for private healthcare. This same group of individuals may also be ineligible for Medicaid. This puts many hardworking neighbors, friends, and people who serve our communities every day in a terrible predicament.

This is where BVMI comes through for many who

comprehensive mental health services and practitioners available to help diagnose and treat depression and anxiety, conditions that are part of an ongoing health crisis and silently afflicting people from all walks of life, especially those living below the poverty line who have not had access to health-care.

BVMI works hard to meet the unique needs of a diverse patient population. A patient-centered approach to care includes interpreters and acknowledgement of the wide range of cultural, educational, and life experiences, making treatment more cohesive, inclusive, and effective.

BVMI goes beyond physical health; it approaches the care of each person holistically. Their case manager collaborates with more than 100 community organizations in food security, rent and utility assistance, unemployment, job training, childcare, mental health assistance and more to ensure that each patient is assisted in meeting critical needs. Ongoing care is provided for patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol. This includes medication monitoring and educating

patients on nutrition, exercise, and other healthy lifestyle habits.

When the seed for this operation was planted by physician Sam Cassell, he was working overseas helping patients who could not otherwise receive care. He thought about the hardworking people in our community who are in desperate need of care. BVMI was born of a desire to provide help. BVMI is like Doctors Without Borders in Bergen County.

Word of mouth has helped the organization maintain a steady stream of volunteers, but BVMI is always looking for more help. From retired practitioners to hospital workers and specialists, there are great opportunities to serve the community, save lives and be a beacon of light for humanity.

In January 2024, BVMI will expand its care by opening a second free health clinic in Garfield.

“Our second clinic in Garfield will soon welcome more patients seeking our services who, without BVMI, would go without the care they deserve,” said Missey.

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BVMI@Unity Health in Garfield will be a model for the state by providing healthcare for up to 1,500 patients in southern Bergen County. The new healthcare center in Garfield will be part of a larger wellness collaborative - and the first of its kind in New Jersey - called Unity Health Partnership. This new Unity Health Partnership will include other non-profits addressing food insecurity, poverty, mental health, and public health—a true collaboration for good.

BVMI relies on private donations, corporate and family foundations, and government grants to support the mission. They do not accept payments from patients or bill insurance.

If you or someone you know may be a good fit for BVMI, reach out through the website. It's a beautiful way to offer your time and expertise and help restore health and dignity to the lives of people in your community. When our neighbors are healthy, we are healthier as a community.

BVMI's 15th Anniversary Gala will be held on Thursday, Sept. 26 at The Venetian, Garfield. For more information on tickets and sponsorship opportunities, go to the BVMI website, <https://www.bvmi.org/anniversary-gala/>.