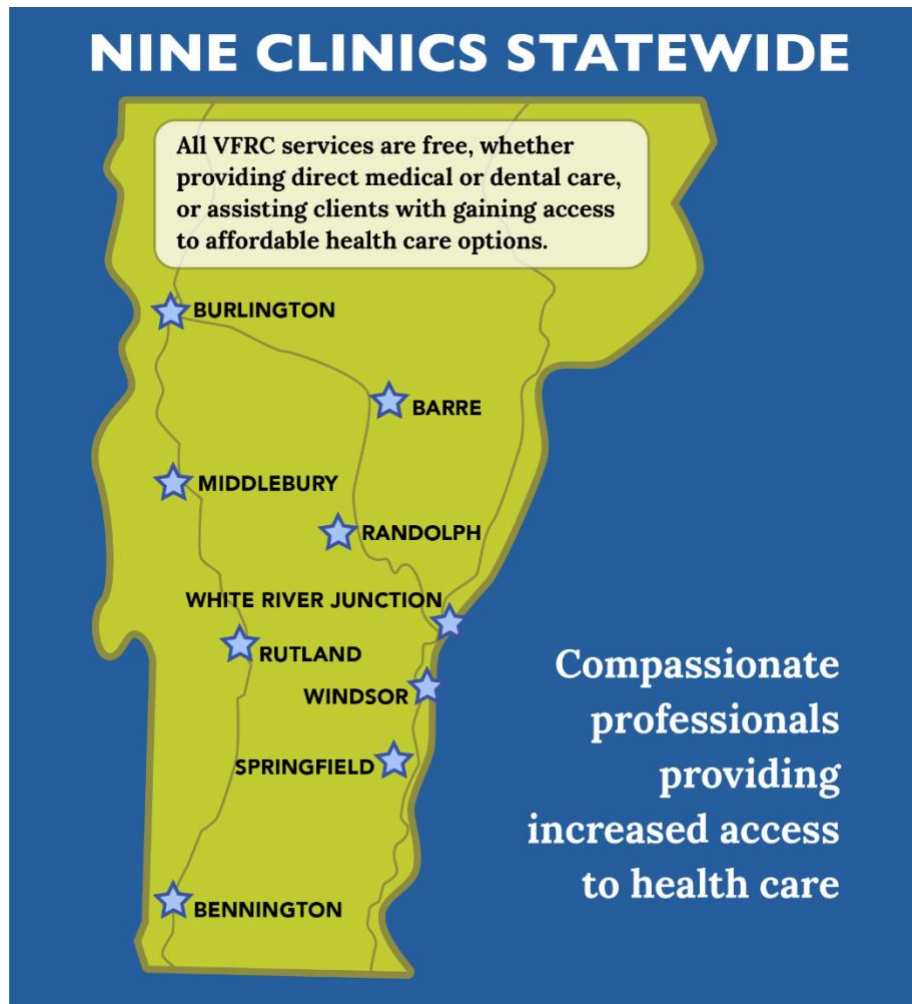




Stories of Our Clinics - 2020

Serving Vermonters through the Pandemic



OUR 9 MEMBER FREE CLINIC PROGRAMS INCLUDE:

- Bennington Free Clinic** – Bennington, VT - *Medical and Dental Services*
- Good Neighbor Health Clinic & Red Logan Dental Clinic** – White River Junction, VT - *Medical and Dental Services*
- Health Assistance Program at the University of Vermont Medical Center** – Burlington, VT - *Referral Services Only*
- Health Connections at Gifford** – Randolph, VT - *Referral Services Only*
- Open Door Clinic** – Middlebury, VT - *Medical and Dental Services*
- People's Health & Wellness Clinic** – Barre, VT - *Medical and Dental Services*
- Rutland County Free Clinic & Dental Clinic** – Rutland, VT - *Medical and Dental Services*
- Valley Health Connections** – Springfield, VT - *Referral Services Only*
- Windsor Community Health Clinic at Mt. Ascutney Hospital** – Windsor, VT - *Referral Services Only*



Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics Find New Ways of Caring During Pandemic

Throughout 2020 – a year in which Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics (VFRC) marked its 25th anniversary as a statewide coalition – the COVID-19 pandemic presented daunting and unprecedented challenges for VFRC's nine member clinics.



Representatives of all nine member clinics of Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics met regularly via Zoom and provided one another with valuable resources and mutual support during the most challenging year in VFRC's 25-year history.

At first, most clinic operations around the state shifted to utilizing a variety of remote technologies to provide as many health services as possible to vulnerable Vermonters. Free clinics in Barre, Bennington, Middlebury, Rutland, and White River Junction pivoted to telehealth services in the earliest weeks of the pandemic, before returning early last summer to the mix of both in-person clinic visits and telemedicine that remain in place today.

The four VFRC clinics that refer for care in their communities - located in Burlington, Randolph, Springfield, and Windsor - all switched seamlessly to providing referral services remotely via telephone, helping Vermonters to sign up for health care coverage, assisting with finding lower cost

or free prescription drugs, and connecting patients and clients with other community services at a time of extraordinary stress and concern.

The experience of the Rutland County Free Clinic in Rutland exemplified the way in which each of the nine VFRC clinics pivoted to new, even expanded ways of caring throughout this most difficult of years. The emphasis for each clinic, more so than ever, was on staying compassionately connected with the people and communities they serve.

One of the things that the Rutland caregivers opted to do was to significantly expand the number of wellness check-ins with their large roster of patients. “There’s always two sides to every coin. The need for our services didn’t stop with the shutdowns. If anything, our patients needed us more than ever. We sat ourselves down and asked, ‘What can we do differently? How can we continue to serve the people in other ways?’” said Tia Paolino, the Executive Director of the Rutland clinic. “That allowed us to connect in new and different ways that were very well received and appreciated by our patients and volunteers,” she added.

“That good work will carry on, post-COVID,” Paolino continued. “We started doing more wellness calls and check-ins by phone, simply asking our patients, ‘How are you doing? Are you feeling okay? Would you like to know about the next pop-up testing opportunity for the virus?’ There are many things we want to continue to do when this pandemic is over.”

Each of the nine VFRC clinics responded to the trials of the coronavirus pandemic with creativity, sensitivity, compassion, and aplomb. Here are some of their stories from the past year. From Bennington to Burlington and Rutland to White River Junction, we all look forward to a healthier, brighter future for all Vermonters.



The Open Door Clinic was delighted to be able to purchase this used service van last summer. It is used to transport all the supplies needed for the clinic's farm and rural outreach efforts in Addison County.

THE HEALTH ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AT THE UVM MEDICAL CENTER

Burlington, Vermont

Responding with Aplomb in a Time of Unprecedented Challenges

Like all four of the referral programs among Vermont's Free and Referral Clinics (VFRC) at the outset of the pandemic, the Health Assistance Program (HAP) at the University of Vermont Medical Center made a successful transition to working remotely with minimal patient impact and disruption. In fact, HAP was able to expand the scope of its services, providing referral and insurance enrollment assistance to the Central Vermont Medical Center and Porter Hospital catchment areas.



The expansion of services included growing one of HAP's signature programs – the provision of medications at no cost to all patients who qualify – offering ready access to

care and helping vulnerable people stay well. This was particularly valuable for those patients who were struggling to afford prescriptions when lost jobs or work cutbacks dramatically decreased their incomes.

During the first four months of the pandemic, HAP staff also made 350 outreach calls to patients age 65 and older, offering a warm and welcome call to people who were particularly frightened of and potentially impacted by COVID. "It quickly became clear how meaningful these calls were to people who were alone, isolated, and had needs but didn't know how to address them," said HAP Executive Director Erin Armstrong.

HAP stepped up throughout 2020 to expand upon its traditional role of assisting patients with health insurance needs. This was particularly the case with the state's Vermont Health Connect (VHC) program, which responded to the pandemic by offering multiple open enrollment periods for health insurance coverage beyond the customary early-November-to-late-December period of past years.

In late 2020, another daunting challenge presented itself: the UVM Medical Center, of which the HAP program is a part, was struck by a massive cyberattack, making much of its information technology systems balky or inoperable. A lot of the work that HAP staff had completed earlier in the fall and summer to enable real-time, remote answering of phone calls and provide enhanced internet connectivity for patients was disrupted. For example, it was difficult for remote staff members to answer phone calls live and they had to revert to returning voice mail messages as

quickly as possible. Access to Vermont Health Connect was also limited during a time of high enrollment demand.

Despite considerable challenges throughout the year, however, HAP staff responded with aplomb, working closely with the medical center's pharmacy team, other clinicians, and enrollment specialists at VHC and insurance providers to make certain that patient needs continued to be met in as efficient and timely a manner as possible, the impacts of COVID and the cyberattack notwithstanding.



The Health Assistance Program (HAP) at the University of Vermont Medical Center made a successful transition to working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, HAP was able to expand its referral and insurance enrollment services to include the Central Vermont Medical Center and Porter Hospital catchment areas.

GOOD NEIGHBOR HEALTH CLINIC & RED LOGAN DENTAL CLINIC

White River Junction, Vermont

Pivoting and Innovating, Clinics Keep on Caring During Challenging Times

The Good Neighbor Health Clinic (GNHC) and Red Logan Dental Clinic (RLDC) adapted quickly with the onset of COVID 19 last spring. Medical programs such as Tele-health and Homeless Outreach were implemented as a means to provide continuity of care for clinic patients. The Dental Clinic was temporarily shut by order of the Governor in the spring of 2020 and reopened with volunteer dentists and fourth year dental school externs providing emergency care for patients throughout the balance of the year. For the first time, a staff dentist joined the clinic in January of 2021.

Here are a trio of stories that exemplify the good work of the GNHC and RLDC clinicians and volunteers over the course of 2020. Each story points to the critical roles of the clinics' in-house clinicians, dedicated volunteers, and close collaborations with other providers and social service organizations in the Upper Valley region.



Kristin Bradley, DDS, joined the Red Logan Dental Clinic as the dentist and clinic manager in January 2021.

Fred*, a patient in his mid-50s who lived alone, returned to GNHC after last being seen by the clinic seven years ago. He had lost a job with health insurance and knew that his diabetes blood sugar levels were so out of control that he was risking a diabetic coma. Good Neighbor's team of nurse practitioners – Nathalie Hebert and Mary Stevens – worked closely with Dr. John Turco, a volunteer endocrinologist, to identify a new medication that helped to get Fred's blood sugar under control. A local pharmacy was especially helpful in finding coupons that allowed Fred to keep his out-of-pocket cost to just \$5 for the new prescription. GNHC staff continues to follow up with Fred.

The dental pain was so intense that Gisele*, an international graduate student without insurance, was unable to focus on her studies. Three courses of antibiotics controlled the dental infection but each time the prescription ended the pain returned. When she reached out to Good Neighbor Health and Red Logan Dental Clinics staff members educated Gisele about the need to be treated before the positive effects of the antibiotics ended. Good Neighbor Clinic staff coordinated access to grant funding from Granite United Way, administered by the White River Junction-based Upper Valley Haven during the coronavirus shutdown. As a result, the student was able to have an infected wisdom tooth extracted at Hanover Oral Surgery. The clinic's role of providing patient education and connecting Gisele with area resources was key to a positive outcome.

When the pandemic hit in March, people experiencing homelessness were offered lodging in area motels. A network of service providers from The Haven to the Vermont Department of Health, including Good Neighbor Clinics, worked together to create care plans for patients who needed COVID-19 testing or might test positively for the virus. Two efforts came together with Good Neighbor participating in both. First, a caravan of human service providers traveled to each motel bi-weekly (through the fall) to provide food, masks, hand-sanitizer, and information to the motel

residents. Secondly, under the leadership of Dr. Peter Mason, and in coordination with Haven case managers, Geisel School of Medicine students were paired with motel residents for a weekly telephone check-in. Referrals were made, medical questions were answered, and residents felt supported. This partnership continues with the three agencies mentioned above now working to provide COVID vaccines to those who are homeless and the people who work with them.



Like all of the clinic-members of Vermont’s Free and Referral Clinics (VFRC), the Good Neighbor Health Clinic and Red Logan Dental Clinic have pivoted effectively throughout the pandemic to find creative, alternative means of meeting the medical and dental health needs of uninsured and underserved Vermonters. The clinics’ collaborations among staff; volunteer, community-based providers; and regional social service organizations were essential to that endeavor.

** The patients’ names have been changed to respect privacy, protect identity, and assure confidentiality.*

OPEN DOOR CLINIC

Middlebury, Vermont

Opening the Door to Health Care for Jason and Sierra

Jason and Sierra* arrived in Vermont in the fall of 2020. They’ve been living in an RV. Jason is morbidly obese and his wife, Sierra, has a myriad of health issues of her own. They struggled to find a way to receive the medical care they sorely needed.



Increasing Access to Healthcare

That’s when a neighbor told them about the Open Door Clinic (ODC).

The pair called the clinic, and each made an appointment to be seen by a provider. Melanie Clark, ODC’s Vermont Health Connect certified application counselor, screened the couple to determine if they were eligible for health insurance. At the time, they were not: Jason’s unemployment benefit put them over the threshold for Medicaid and they were not within the special enrollment period to purchase a plan.

Though unable to enroll in an insurance program, Jason and Sierra nonetheless continued to be seen by the clinic's volunteer caregivers. Open Door staff assisted the couple with their existing healthcare issues and ensured that they received preventive services as well. They also helped Jason and Sierra access other free healthcare services available to them in the community.

Several weeks into receiving care at the ODC, Jason noted on his clinic paperwork that his unemployment benefits had been exhausted. His benefit was unrelated to COVID-19, so he wasn't eligible for an extension. A volunteer nurse who was caring for the couple immediately notified Melanie Clark of the situation and Clark worked closely with the couple to enroll them in Medicaid. She then counseled the couple about all aspects of their benefits, worked with Medicaid to resolve a prescription billing issue, and assisted the couple in finding a new primary care provider and dentist to oversee their health care.

Jason and Sierra have been effusive in their gratitude for all that the ODC team has done to help them as they settle into a new community in Vermont. Prior to being seen by the clinic, the couple had been delaying care and not taking their necessary prescriptions. Sierra in particular said she felt helpless and was living in constant fear for her health.

Four months after following up on a fateful recommendation from a new neighbor and friend, Jason and Sierra have their health care back on track. They are taking their required prescriptions and are getting insurance through Medicaid. One call to the Open Door Clinic was all it took to completely turn their lives around.

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PEOPLE'S HEALTH & WELLNESS CLINIC

Barre, Vermont

Comprehensive Care for Chronic Illness Continues in the Face of Pandemic

Henry*, a longtime patient of the People's Health & Wellness Clinic (PHWC), has a prolonged history of chronic interstitial lung disease. The condition often leaves him feeling weak and markedly short of breath. Despite these challenges, Henry continues to work at a labor-intensive job and remains active.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, shook Henry to his core. As the pandemic escalated last spring, Henry felt desperate to remain at home, worried about how COVID-19 might

threaten his already fragile respiratory system. At the same time, he worried that it would not be safe for him to access routine health care.

Upon hearing of Henry's concerns, PHWC reached out and offered its longtime patient a telehealth visit. Henry was unable to engage in a video conference with a clinic provider because he lacked internet service and a device for making a video connection. However, he has had chronic lung disease for so long that he is very aware of its symptoms and is able to monitor them quite well at home. PHWC Nurse Case Manager Nicole Valcour and the clinic's volunteer providers have connected with Henry regularly and kept him safe and healthy throughout the past year, due in large part to his increased participation in his own health care.

Working with the Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care (VPQHC), a non-profit organization designated by the Vermont Legislature to assist healthcare providers with quality improvement endeavors, the Barre-based PHWC recently received donated Apple iPad tablets that are lent to patients during telehealth visits. Henry has been given a tablet, improving his ability to connect remotely with a medical provider. For example, when Henry and other health-compromised patients do go to PHWC for one of the clinic's very limited in-person visits during the pandemic – such as for the flu shot that Henry recently received – they can connect with a provider for a consultation via the tablet without having to talk face-to-face.



Nicole Valcour, nurse manager at the People's Health & Wellness Clinic, speaks with a volunteer provider prior to a telehealth clinic.

“Whenever our patients require a physical exam, they are offered one,” explains PHWC Executive Director Rebecca Goldfinger-Fein, “but we prioritize virtual visits when possible. When someone comes into the clinic who does not have internet access at home, we give them a tablet, set them up in a room at the clinic, and let them talk to a provider without having actual physical contact. We can also send an iPad home with a person who does have internet access. We give it or loan the tablet to them. That way people with a recurring healthcare need can connect with a provider without having to come into the clinic. It has proved to be a great way to keep people connected.”

Goldfinger-Fein also noted another consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic that could be seen as a “silver lining” of sorts, if such a thing is possible. “It feels as if, particularly for patients such as Henry, that the clinic has had to relinquish some of the control that we usually exercise over the health care of our patients,” the PHWC executive director concluded.



“The patients must now become a more active part of their own healthcare team. Our telehealth program is flourishing, and we are grateful for this new way to connect with patients and collaborate in their care.”

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RUTLAND COUNTY FREE CLINIC

Rutland, Vermont

Clinic Recalibrates, Innovates, Maintaining Patient Contacts During COVID

The coronavirus pandemic struck the United States with a vengeance one year ago, a few scant weeks after Tia Poalino took over as the executive director of the Rutland County Free Clinic (RCFC), filling the extraordinary shoes of the late, longtime clinic leader Tony Morgan, who succumbed to cancer on Christmas Eve 2019.



Suddenly, early on in the new year, Poalino and the caring, compassionate RCFC staff of providers and volunteers had to pivot to embrace a daunting new reality: how to continue serving the medical and dental care needs of uninsured, underinsured, and underserved Vermonters throughout Rutland County.

“We didn’t feel that we would be acting in the best interests of the people we serve or our volunteers if we weren’t completely sure that we could provide our services with health and safety as the foremost issues in mind,” Poalino recalled. “We lost our dental program. It was suspended immediately, per the governor’s orders. The clinic’s referral service for dental was also lost, as all of



With strong volunteer support and funding from the United Way of Chittenden County, the Rutland County Free Clinic was able to assemble and deliver vital care packages of household essentials to local communities in need throughout the pandemic.

our volunteer dental providers in the area were shut down for approximately three months to comply with the state mandate. We suspended in-person care at the medical clinic at the same time.”

Speaking of the clinic’s medical services, Poalino said that clinic operations were able to resume in-person medical clinics in early summer, after also weathering an approximate three-month shutdown. If it can be said that there was any “upside” to the clinic’s experiences with the pandemic, Poalino said RCFC’s providers and volunteers embraced the challenges posed by COVID with passion, commitment, and creativity.

“There’s always two sides to every coin. The need for our services didn’t stop with the shutdowns. If anything, our patients needed us more than ever. So we sat ourselves down and said, ‘What can we do differently? How can we continue to serve the people in other ways?’” Poalino commented.

“That allowed us to connect in new and different ways that were very well received and appreciated by our patients and volunteers. There are many things we want to continue to do when this pandemic is over. We started doing more wellness calls and check-ins by phone, simply asking our patients, ‘How are you doing? Are you feeling okay? Would you like to know about the next pop-up testing opportunity for the virus?’

“This is an area where we can still help people so that they don’t feel so alone and so frightened,” Poalino continued. “We reached out to our older patients first – they were the first people to be called at the outset. Many of them are living alone, they have no supports, no family members nearby, no transportation. They listen to the news and they’re concerned, perhaps frightened and definitely stressed. To get a regular call from someone they know and trust - to let them know that someone cares about how they are feeling and that they are not alone – it reassures them and eases that emotional stress.”

Despite the many challenges of COVID, key aspects of the RFCC’s medical services rebounded well once that clinic reopened for in-person service in late June of last year. Poalino cites the case of Susan* as an example of how a patient can present at the clinic with one evident malady – in this case, dental pain – only to find out that an even more pressing medical condition needs immediate attention. (NOTE: The dental clinic at the RCFC had yet to reopen as of February 2021.)

Susan reached out to the Rutland clinic in search of an antibiotic to treat a dental abscess. “Our oral health is directly linked to our overall health,” Poalino said, noting that any new dental patient at the clinic is always evaluated by a medical provider first. In the course of her intake exam, Susan expressed concern that she had gained more than 60 pounds over the course of the past year. She’d lost a job some months before, and with it her health insurance, so she did nothing to address the weight gain because she couldn’t afford the cost of care.

An RCFC clinician ordered lab tests for Susan, which revealed that her thyroid was barely functioning. The local woman is now on a medication regimen and she is receiving the regular care she needs. Her overall health is markedly improved.

“Susan’s situation is a great example of what we might see here at the clinic several times a year,” Tia Poalino enthused. “It’s a case where you say, ‘Thank goodness this person found us, came through our doors, and we were able to help.’

“Susan is in our data base now and she will continue to receive care from the Free Clinic as long as she needs it. She doesn’t have to worry about the cost of her medications or seeking further medical

assistance if she is feeling unwell. Until she is prepared to assume the cost of her care, we have her covered.”

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A direct relief grant from the National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics enabled the Rutland County Free Clinic to provide first aid kits to people in need during the COVID-19 pandemic. The kits included personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves, as well as hand sanitizer and other basic first-aid supplies.