

"A heart for those who need it"

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Clinic With a Heart in two southwest Lincoln schools provides health care for kids who can't get it otherwise.

In the post-school day bustle of parent-teacher conferences Thursday, tucked between the book fair and the waiting teachers, a group of volunteers with plastic-covered nametags waited.

Before long, a family of five — a mom, a dad, a baby, a boy and a 5-year-old girl with a tummy ache — found them,

in the back end of McPhee Elementary's main entrance hallway, there to help. Not your typical doctor's office. And that's the point.

The clinic, set up in a hallway, a health office and a couple of classrooms, is for those who can't get to their doctor, or don't have one, or can't afford the co-pay or the cost of the visit.

It's for those families who face some or all those issues but still have a 5-year-old daughter with a tummy ache, or a baby with a fever, or a son with a rash.

Now those families can come to Clinic With a Heart, a free urgent care health clinic that's moved into two southwest Lincoln neighborhood schools: McPhee and Saratoga.

Clinic With a Heart was begun in 2003 by Dr. Rob Rhodes and sees 50 to 60 patients four times a month at the Center for People in Need. Just 23 percent of its patients are children.



The clinic's new school locations — designed just for children from birth to fifth grade — are part of the Community Learning Centers at those schools and are the culmination of at least two years of research. "This has been a long conversation," said Cathie Petsch, co-coordinator of the CLCs.

The conversation began at the Saratoga School Neighborhood Advisory Committee, which did an analysis of the needs of families in the neighborhood. “They determined that there’s lots of available, lower-cost health services, but most are north of O (Street),” Petsch said. That can present a problem for families, especially those who don’t have transportation.

On top of that, many families are either uninsured or underinsured. In today’s economy, that can make for some hard choices, said Bess Scott, former McPhee principal who is now director of elementary education for Lincoln Public Schools. “We’re at the state, economically, where people are underinsured and with co-pays they can’t (pay), so they’re making decisions we couldn’t have imagined 20 years ago,” she said.

And even clinics that target such patients are overburdened. The waiting list at the People’s Health Center, for instance, is about three months, Executive Director Steven Bray said. The goal of moving the clinics into the schools is to eliminate illness as a barrier to education.

McPhee, for instance, has the highest absence rate of any elementary in the city. Often, a child gets sick and, because of district rules, can’t come back until the symptoms have disappeared, Scott said. For families who don’t have a doctor to get medication, those symptoms last significantly longer. “What that exacerbates is you have to be in school to learn, and so it’s a vicious cycle,” Scott said. “The bottom line is healthy kids learn.”

Petsch said the collaboration between the clinic and the CLCs is only the second school-based clinic she’s found in the state and the only one that uses community volunteers.

Clinic With a Heart is sponsored by churches, whose volunteers man the reception area and guide patients from lab to doctor’s office to pharmacy.

Executive Director Teresa Harms said one of the clinic’s goals is to help patients find regular doctors or clinics. The CLC will work with families on referrals, filling out paperwork and finding them regular doctors if they don’t have them. But this new venture is a work in progress.

So far at Saratoga and McPhee, there have been fewer patients than anyone expected. They had about four at each clinic the first month, eight the next, Harms said. Part of that may be that flu season hasn’t really set in yet, and part of it is building trust with families, Petsch said. “It’s new, and it’s one of those things that no matter how much publicity we do, it’s really going to be word of mouth,” she said.

Nurses will begin tracking attendance and contacting students who have been absent to see if they need care, she said. Parents also might be deterred by the term “urgent care,” thinking that if their children aren’t bleeding, they shouldn’t bring them in. That’s not how Scott sees it. “If you have a medical concern, you bring them,” Scott said. “That’s what urgent means to me.”

And on Thursday, urgent meant a persistent tummy ache for Maryam Abdelmonem, who goes to Holmes Elementary.

Her parents, who moved from Egypt to Lincoln for two years because her father is working at the University of Nebraska, heard about the clinic through their school.

They don't have a regular doctor, they said, and this seemed like a good option. And before long, an interpreter appeared to help the doctor and the parents communicate.



While Maryam had her blood pressure taken and her tummy examined by a pediatrician, her younger siblings colored and ate candy and had attention showered on them by two young volunteers from First-Plymouth Congregational Church.

Joyce Sturdy, who coordinates the First-Plymouth volunteers, said she is a retired medical social worker who is familiar

with the vulnerability of those without adequate insurance. So when her church agreed to sponsor the McPhee clinic, she wanted to help.

On Thursday, the 20 volunteers — many of whom had experience in the medical field — far outnumbered the patients. Maryam was one of four patients. Two were adults, an exception to the rules of the school clinics made because there was a general practitioner there in addition to a pediatrician, and the adults were fairly ill. Gretchen Mills, a paraeducator at McPhee, brought her 7-year-old son for a check-up on Thursday. She said her son has a regular doctor, but she doesn't have transportation. To have the clinic there was wonderful, she said. "He wouldn't have to miss school, and I don't have to figure out the bus system," she said. "Then, it's a whole-day event."