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Marcia Clark is the clinic's only full time paid nurse.

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Patients to feel pain of volunteer shortage

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Andrea Lypka / MyFoxTampaBay.com

The St. Petersburg Free Clinic faces a volunteer shortage that they say may affect the health care services they provide for thousands of people every year.

The shortage comes at a time when they say the downturn in the economy is causing more people who have lost their jobs and health benefits to seek help at the center.

The clinic offers temporary health care services, which become a long-term lifeline for the uninsured.

Evelyn Duran became a patient at the clinic after she lost her job last year, and her health deteriorated. She was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure in 2005. She takes 10 pills a day and insulin – costly treatment that she can't afford on her own.

At the clinic, Duran pays \$5 per visit for the health care services. She says she might not be here today if it weren't for the help of the volunteer doctors and nurses.

"Without their help, I probably wouldn't be alive today. They are a godsend, and a blessing," she said.

The Health Center at the St. Petersburg Free Clinic fills a gap because it provides health care for the uninsured who don't qualify for Medicaid or are not old enough for Medicare.

But the director of the Health Center says recent volunteer shortages at the center and county funding cutbacks mean treatment for fewer people.

"Due to the county and state funding cutback in health care, it's extremely difficult to get special patient care," said Ronda Russick, director of the center.

Russick says she sees the funding for health care shrinking every year. The recent cutbacks in county funding for healthcare have faces attached to them, she says.

"There is going to be a cost in human suffering. This will be reflected in flesh and blood, and pain," Russick said. "We know that people, who are currently getting care, will no longer be able to do so. This results in that some of us who are in the front line of health care become rationers of care. That's a horrible position to find yourself in. At the free clinic, we haven't gotten quite there yet."

Russick says the waiting list is very long for special care and the clinic needs more volunteers to treat the patients.

"We need somewhere between 30 to 40 nurses a month to volunteer because we have 40 doctors who volunteer," said Marcia Clark, Free Clinic Health Center Nurse Coordinator, and the only full-time paid nurse at the clinic.

The clinic is sustained by donations of time from the medical staff, and donations of medical supplies. Doctors and nurses treat people with diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure and other conditions.

"We might see about 40 to 50 people a day, depending on how many doctors or nurses we have that day," Clark added.

Nurse practitioner Maria Viking is the resource person for the volunteers and patients. She has been working at the hospital since September.

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"We have several asthmatics coming in who are close to being in the ER. We can give them a breathing treatment, a nebulizer, an aerosol salt treatment, and put them on protocol for their asthma and prevent them from utilizing the ER," she said.

Viking says that the patients are sicker than they used to be.

"We started tracking how many people have come to us that have recently been laid off within the past three months. That's about 25 percent of the total number we see each month come to us after having been laid off," Viking said.

Right now, 25 nurses and 40 doctors volunteer at the facility. Russick says the volunteers' biggest reward is to make a difference in people's lives.

"They will go home tired at night but they will know they helped someone else. It also helps them connect with a wonderful team of people who have good motivations who are after good goals in life. It's a good place to be," she says.

And patients at the clinic agree. For Evelyn Duran, who says she barely has enough money to buy food, the help she gets is the difference between life and death.

"The doctors and nurses are helping me a lot. I am grateful for them," said Evelyn Duran. "There are a lot of people like myself out there that need help. I think a lot of people would die without their help."

For more information about the St. Petersburg Free Clinic, and how to volunteer, [click here](#) .

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