

Churches come together to support free, urgent care for the uninsured

by **ROBERT WHALE**

Sean Marts, unemployed, uninsured, saddled with medical bills he can't pay, read about the Christ Community Free Clinic Friday in a flyer at the Auburn Food Bank.

Saturday morning, the 24-year-old Auburn man decided to check the place out for himself. He was glad he did.

"I've got so much debt from emergency rooms that I am afraid to go there," Marts said. "I came in here for assistance with programs that are available, and I actually got in and talked to a medical professional."

Mart is exactly what Auburn Physician Julie Stroud, a member of Grace Community Church, had in mind when she decided a year-and-a-half ago to open a clinic offering free urgent medical care and referral services to the uninsured.

Stroud got the idea after reading Rick Warren's best selling book, "The Purpose Driven Life," and mulling his question: "What are your plans to impact the community around you?"

Stroud was unavailable for comment last week, but board member Jeff Johnson explained the mission of the clinic at 1 A St. N.W. directly west of Auburn City Hall.

"Our mission is to take care of people without insurance," said Johnson. "When people see the word 'free' they are going to come by. We will see people as we have time, but we are going to make sure the sickest and those who don't have insurance are seen first."

The clinic is open from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Saturdays. Serving South King County and north Pierce County, it is the nearest free clinic between Renton and Tacoma.

It is supported by five churches: Grace Community Church in Auburn; Hillside Community Church in Enumclaw; Steel Lake Presbyterian in Federal Way; White River Presbyterian Church in Auburn; and Messiah Lutheran Church in Auburn.

Johnson, an insurance broker, said in his 26 years in business he has seen the price of health care increase from \$35 a month to today's average price of \$300 to \$400 a month for a single person and \$1,000 a month for a middle-aged person in a family.

"You may be in a low-income job and your employer makes you wait six months to a year to qualify for health insurance. Most small businesses don't offer health insurance. Only 44 percent of business with fewer than 10 employees will pay for their insurance. That's why we have all these people without insurance. The business or the individual can't afford it. The state has two basic resources: Medicaid or Basic Health. Medicaid is designed for people at the 100-percent poverty level or under. But you are only eligible for Medicaid if you are a senior citizen, disabled or have a child. If you are an able-bodied, single person, low income or no income, there is nothing out there for you."

In addition to Stroud, the nurses, practitioners and nursing assistants all volunteer their time.

Catherine Igielski, retired from nursing after 12 years with Seattle- King County Public Health, explained what got her involved.

"I have a genuine interest in helping others, especially a diverse population," Igielski said. "I really feel for the under-served populations. They need someone to advocate for them. By advocating, I hope to be able to empower them so they know the questions to ask and not to be intimidated by the barriers many of them face in language and transportation. We want to treat people as a whole, meeting their physical, emotional and spiritual needs."

Igielski said the clinic treats minor problems, for example, respiratory or urinary tract infections.

"We are not doing blood draws or lab tests. We don't set broken arms. We don't have those facilities at this point. We are pretty low key with what we can treat. We do refer people to a community clinic and Public Health, but not back to an emergency room," Igielski said.

"It's not acute care where you need to see a doctor now or continuing care where you've got a chronic condition," Johnson added. "It's same-day urgent care if you don't have insurance. You know, 'I am sick today, but drinking water and taking aspirin isn't helping.' Typically, you've got an infection that you can't take care of yourself."

Johnson said the clinic, which opened March 31, 2007, has its own urgent needs.

"As a beginning free clinic, first of all we need patients, second we need volunteers, third we need donations to support our mission. All the information is on our Web site. You can send a check to the post office box. But to sustain and grow the clinic and to get it to 20 hours a week, we need consistent donors. We need the people who give every month. We are starting to build up our monthly donor base. We need volunteers not only to run the clinic, but to raise funds," Johnson said.

Everything in the clinic has been donated.

Johnson said the clinic is about putting faith into action.

"We are here to pray with people, but not proselytize," Johnson said.

For more information, visit the clinic on the Web at www.christfreeclinic.org