



## COVID-19 Response: The Free Clinic Leads the Way

A recent survey by the Medical Group Management Association indicates that small medical group practices have been impacted significantly by COVID-19, with a 60% decrease in patient volume since the beginning of the crisis. **Many primary care practices are struggling just when their services are needed the most.** Dental practices have been particularly hard hit. In a recent poll by the American Dental Association's Health Policy Institute, 79% of dental practices reported that they were seeing emergency patients only, with 17% closed entirely.

Staff and volunteers at the Free Clinic have made meaningful operational changes to ensure that we remain open and able to serve our patients, who rely on us for medical, dental and pharmacy services. While we saw a 25% decrease in patient volume in March and April compared to January and February 2020, **we were able to continue to provide medical services three days a week, dental services two days a week, and our pharmacy operations were not impacted at all.**

Our volunteers and staff have been incredible during the last two months:

- they quickly embraced telehealth services to reduce the volume of patients in our facilities
- volunteer providers and scribes took on additional patients so that other volunteers could follow medical advice to stay home
- board members achieved proficiency in virtual meetings
- staff juggled telework with increased childcare responsibilities due to school closures

As restrictions are lifted across the state, we are ramping our medical and dental practices back up. Dental and Physician Assistant students will return in June. We are developing our summer provider schedules, and almost all of our volunteer providers will be returning to the Free Clinic. We are excited about the new possibilities of telehealth and remote work that the past two months have brought, while remaining guarded about the future impact of COVID-19. One thing is certain: **COVID-19 has highlighted inequities in healthcare, and the Free Clinic plays a key role in ensuring high-quality, compassionate and comprehensive care for every member of our community.**

### NINE CHANGES IN NINE WEEKS

**Operational changes to better serve our patients and ensure our financial viability in this difficult time:**

1. Applied for and received \$138,000 in Paycheck Protection Program funding
2. Implemented protocols to screen all patients upon arrival for symptoms of COVID-19
3. Secured Personal Protective Equipment to ensure safe operations (more is still needed)
4. While most practices have decreased walk-in access, through our partnership with Community Access Network, we were able to increase walk-in access
5. Implemented telehealth at the first signs of COVID-19 in our community, with a fully functioning telehealth system in place by April 1 (over 50% of visits in April were televisits)
6. Continued to provide emergency dental care (we are ramping our dental program back up now that the restrictions on elective surgeries have been lifted)
7. Implemented staff telework options within two weeks of the first signs of COVID-19
8. Established an Infection Control Team, which met twice daily in March and April to develop screening and clinical protocols
9. Proceeded with the transition of our dental records into our eClinicalWorks electronic health record to ensure integration of services and continuity of care

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# Protecting your Mental Health During a Pandemic

By Sarah Horrocks, Licensed Resident in Counseling, Free Clinic of Central Virginia

For most people, life has changed significantly in the past couple of months. COVID-19 does not just threaten physical illness; the pandemic is affecting our mental health as well. Great minds in psychology and counseling agree that we are enduring a communal trauma. And while we may all be in the same rough sea, we are not all in the same boat. This is important to remember, whether considering the response of others or considering your own. Be gentle. Be kind.

As we navigate this unusual time, attending to your mental health is vital. For many, the novelty of the quarantine is long over and depression and anxiety have set in. For some, it can feel confining. Our sense of control has diminished. Furthermore, some may feel pressure to be productive – to clean, learn a new language, or write a book – and yet some of us are struggling just to get out of bed and shower.

Fortunately, there is much that we can do to bolster our mental health:

**Routine** – Keep to a schedule. Wake up at your usual time and have an agenda for the day. Your routine does not have to include things that society would generally consider “productive” – the important thing is to keep to a routine.

**Reach out** – Video chat friends, text, call! Write letters the old-fashioned way! Reduce the emotional distance between yourself and others.

**Run** – Exercise. Walk. Saunter. Sprint. Lift weights. Stretch. The important thing is to move. Get out in the sunshine!

**Roughage** – Eat healthy foods. Research has begun to show more and more that inflammation in the gut can have a significant effect on an individual’s mental wellness. When depression and anxiety hit, they can cause a lack of appetite. Nourish yourself with healthy food to help build mental (and physical) resilience.

**Relax your expectations** – This may be the most important “R”. Coming to a virtual standstill and imposed isolation presents us with much more unstructured time. This can create an environment for pressure to be productive. If you want to read a library full of books or write one, great. If your accomplishment for the day simply involves getting out of bed and taking a shower – that is okay too! We are living in an unusual time. Be gentle with yourself. We are all in uncharted territory and doing the best we can, including you.

Finally, if you find yourself struggling, please consider counseling. The mental health effects of COVID-19 will persist well beyond the development and administration of a vaccine to fight the virus. The Free Clinic offers counseling services to our patients. Additionally, your insurance company can provide you with a list of in-network providers, and lower cost options are available through psychotherapy collectives.

Emotional and mental hiccups (or longer term issues) are NOT unusual. Men, women, young, old, religious and not, all socioeconomic groups – we all face challenges and you will find people from all walks in therapy. Seeking help is not weakness, it truly is bravery.



2019 Free Clinic Volunteer Appreciation Reception

## Volunteer Appreciation Reception Postponed

We LOVE our volunteers and we are looking forward to celebrating each of you!

Our yearly Volunteer Appreciation Reception is typically held in June. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and guidelines concerning large gatherings, we have made the decision to postpone this event to the Fall. Details, as they are finalized, will be published in the newsletter and on our Facebook page.

## Telehealth: A New Approach to Medicine

The COVID-19 crisis has given the Free Clinic the challenge and opportunity to identify a method to continue meeting the needs of patients. With a bit of creativity and some changes to our technology, we have found new ways to serve our patients and their families. After many discussions, we determined that we would utilize the telehealth component of our new electronic health record software. This telehealth platform allows for both the audio and visual component of the visit. While we cannot necessarily touch the patient physically, our eyes have been opened to many other pieces of the patient's lives; where they live, the conditions they live in, and what other services we can provide them as a result of what we see.

This platform allows us to connect with patients unlike before; however, many of our patients do not have the technical capability to connect through the internet. Regulatory agencies recognized this would be an obstacle and they released restrictions around telehealth visits, allowing us to utilize the telephone to connect with our patients as well.

Through this season in healthcare the technological advances we have been able to make have been astounding, but the impact we have had on patients has been the most rewarding. At the end of the day, we continue to change lives. We have identified and treated many diseases ranging from mental health disorders to neurological deficits. Words cannot describe the gratitude of the patients, the looks on their faces, and the assurance they receive from this short time we connect with them. Understanding that this may be the first face they have seen in a few months or the voice they needed to hear saying that things are going to be okay, we continue to push forward at the Free Clinic, leading the way in patient care during the COVID-19 crisis.



*Dr. Amber Fedin and scribe Hannah prepare for a telehealth visit.*

***Telehealth provides a valuable service, but it also costs money. The Free Clinic pays our technology provider by the minute for each telehealth visit. Will you partner with us to help offset the cost of this valuable new technology so that we may continue to serve our patients in this way as well as expanding our reach? Please make a donation using the enclosed envelope, or go to <https://www.freeclinicva.org/donate>.***

## Help us Take the Color Out of Future Pandemics

Volunteers at the Free Clinic have long known about the inequities in healthcare in our country, and they do their part to make meaningful change here in Central Virginia. But COVID-19 has clearly shown the stark differences in health outcomes for people of color:

- The Black and Latinx communities in VA are 27.5% of the Population and 67% of Coronavirus Cases (5/13/20 WUSA9).
- Black Americans represent 13% of the population, but have suffered 27% of deaths (5/9/20 APMResearchLab.org).

The most at-risk, the most vulnerable, are paying the highest price, and the Free Clinic is more committed than ever to changing outcomes and taking the color out of health inequities. We are doubling down on our mission to ensure high-quality, compassionate and comprehensive healthcare for every member of our community.



## Providing Comprehensive Dental Care in a Time of Crisis



Dental Assistant Kate Parker and Dental Clinic Coordinator Wynn Burtner

The Free Clinic has continued to provide dental care while following state COVID-19 guidelines. During the state-mandated cancellation of routine dental care, we have been able to provide critical emergency dental services to our patients. As restrictions are lifted across the state, we look forward to bringing back comprehensive routine dental care. Our dental students will return in June and we are developing our summer provider schedules. We are working hard to secure PPE to protect all of our patients, providers and volunteers. We are supplying our providers with level 3 masks, N95 respirators as needed, disposable gowns, face shields, hair bonnets and gloves. We are taking other measures to protect patients such as staggering appointment times to help keep the dental waiting room clear. We would like to thank the following who have helped us to secure vitally needed PPE: Central Virginia Health District, Mr. Philip Allison, and Bank of the James.

*The Free Clinic of Central Virginia envisions a community where everyone has a medical home that provides for optimal individual and community wellness. Our mission is to ensure high-quality, compassionate and comprehensive healthcare for every member of our community. We fulfill this mission by providing high-quality medical, dental, pharmacy, behavioral health and health education services to those in Central Virginia who do not have the resources to obtain these essential healthcare services.*