

Annex addresses growing health care need

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Published December 11, 2005

FREEPORT — As the need for affordable medical care continues and some mailboxes fill with bills, Brazosport Medical Center is trying to keep up the pace, providing a service that's in high demand.

The medical center, which sometimes slips under the radar of those needing low-cost health care in Brazoria County, grew Saturday when it dedicated its new annex, located down the street from its main building on Gulf Boulevard.

"It's a very basic need in this community," said Freeport Mayor Jim Phillips. "It just fills a void that previously in Freeport wasn't being met. ... It was much needed and it is welcomed."

Dozens gathered at the annex celebrating the community's latest addition and pausing to reflect on just how much such services are needed in the county. Father Michael Gemignani, the center's chairman, told the crowd huddled near the roadside at the annex's entrance that the center serves 9,000 people, representing more than 25,000 patient contacts.

Between 80 percent and 90 percent of the center's clients are on Medicaid, and the center is one of a few locations in the county that's willing to take their cases, considering Medicaid reimbursement is low, Gemignani said.

However, "There's still a lot of people in the Brazosport area that don't know this place exists," Gemignani later said. That is something he hopes will change as their outreach efforts continue to grow.

The center opened in 1999 in an 8,200-square-foot building that included about 7,000 square feet renovated for medical services. In time, the available services offered have almost doubled to now include optometry, chiropractic and dental care.

The annex at 712 N. Gulf Blvd., which used to be a dental office, will house the federally funded WIC program, a supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children, along with Youth and Family Counseling Services of Brazoria County.

The move frees room at the main building for a social worker, an expanded medical facility and, perhaps, room for additional family counseling, Gemignani said.

The new facility wouldn't have been possible without Episcopal Health Charities, which gave \$400,000 to start the center; Dow Chemical, which gave a \$25,000 community grant, enabling the center to renovate the former dentist office into administrative and storage space; and Jane and Paul Barnard, the former Freeport dentist who donated the office.

Jane Barnard, who worked with her husband at the dental practice, said they never let anyone be in pain because they didn't have money. But she knows times have changed and not everyone has the same practice.

"We thought it would be nice for the people of Freeport to have care at a reasonable price," she said, explaining why she and her husband decided to donate the building.

Last year, a budget crunch prompted commissioners to reduce eligibility for indigent care. Previously, families at or below the federal poverty level — \$18,850 in wages a year for a family of four — would be eligible. Now, the county will pay for families only making the federally mandated minimum of 21 percent or less of the poverty level, which is less than \$4,000 a year.

"Since we cut back our coverage on indigent care, I have referred people here — one or two a week," said Brazoria County Commissioner Donald "Dude" Payne.

If Gemignani and board members for the center, a United Way agency, get their way, they could be having another dedication ceremony — west of the Brazos.

The center is working with the Brazoria Heritage Foundation to open a medical facility in the old Brazoria Elementary School building off Highway 36, he said.