

The Catholic Voice

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THE MIRACLE ON 21ST STREET

Order of Malta Clinic of Northern California expands its free services to uninsured adults

It's been called the Miracle on 21st Street.

At the corner of 21st and Harrison Streets in Oakland, the Order of Malta Clinic of Northern California has been providing medical care to uninsured adults since 2008.

That's at no cost. No insurance is billed. It's free.

Imagine what that means to the patient. The ability to stay healthy and be able to work and earn money to pay the rent could prevent being homeless.

The clinic's presence, at the base of the Pilgrim's Path leading to the Cathedral of Christ the Light, is the keeping of a centuries-old commitment by the Order of Malta, founded in 1048, to care for the sick and the poor. It's a sign of the commitment, too, of then-Bishop Allen Vigneron, who on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, suggested the possibility of a medical clinic at the cathedral in progress, and to each after him who have supported the clinic.

The clinic runs with a tiny paid staff and an army of volunteers, including almost 50 health care professionals who share their expertise.

Board members are among the volunteers who bring their time, talent and treasure to their tiny clinic. The president of the clinic board is Tim McInerney.

Expansion – physical, services and outreach – is on the agenda for 2022.

Tim, whose father, William McInerney, was the first president of the clinic board, honored the many individuals from the Order of Malta who began the work

of building a medical clinic. “They started opening a few days a week,” Tim said. “We've expanded. Now we're open five days a week, looking to do Saturday hours or longer hours into the evening.”

It's a matter of meeting the needs of patients.

“Most of our people are the working poor,” he said. “They can't take time off work. It's valuable. So we're trying to make our hours better available to them.”

Another expansion is in relationships with training programs. A residency program from John Muir Medical Center participates in the clinic, as well as programs from a handful of local nursing schools.

“We could use their help; it's community service for them,” he said. “It works out well for both parties.”

A relationship with Sutter Health brings a mobile mammography clinic to the site.

“With the expansion, we can help more people,” Tim said, noting that most of the clinic's clients are working people.

“We're one service that could prevent homelessness,” he said. “If we can diagnose and treat a medical condition, these people could continue to work and

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Tim McInerney



Chuck Wirth

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The expansion also includes the greater use of a mobile clinic.

"I'd like to utilize it more, where we can bring medical services to the people, as opposed to having them come to us," Tim said. "We've taken the mobile clinic to parishes in the Diocese of Oakland where the rate of vaccination are lower than the county as a whole."

Expanding the information available to patients is greatly assisted by a partnership with the Mayo Clinic.

All of the members of the clinic board are members of the Order of Malta. They serve on various committees covering various areas of the clinic operation.

Chuck Wirth joined the board after a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

"I met some clinic people on a pilgrimage to Lourdes," he said. "My wife and I went on the pilgrimage; some people found out I had a health care background."

Chuck, who was retired, was invited to visit the clinic, where he met Dt. Thomas Wallace, the nonagenarian neurologist who volunteers regularly at the clinic.

"I was pretty impressed with it all," Chuck said. His background was in running clinics.

"I spent the better part of 30 years working in clinic environments, much of them much larger than our clinic in Oakland," he said. "It seemed to me it was a pretty good fit. It's a wonderful mission and ministry."

"They treat people with respect; it's not hard to do," he said. "It's not so simple to put together the organization that makes it all happen.

"It's an unbelievable organization," he said. "the time, effort and resources people put in the clinic ... it's just amazing."

When Chuck joined the board about two and a half years ago, one of the first things he was asked about was strategic planning.

"One of the things I ask: What's our strategy? When we grow up, what are we going to be? So I had some experience with strategic planning."

Chuck, as the facilitator, brought leadership together for the planning, which took about six months.

"We came up with a pretty robust strategic plan," he said. "One of the major elements was growth. Growth was aligned with providing more care to the uninsured in Northern California. We thought the clinic was pretty much at terminal capacity, with the resources we had, the space we had was the biggest factor."

What would it look like to see more patients? The clinic in its current space has three exam rooms. That's not enough.

But then 2020 came, and like most health care agencies, the clinic closed nonemergency ambulatory services.

"We made the pivot to telemedicine," Chuck said.

"In 2020, we didn't see as many patients, but it was a remarkable number," he said.

"This gives us a whole other way to reach patients that doesn't require brick and mortar," he said.

Telemedicine works well with follow-up visits, but the need for person-to-person care remains in the plans.

Doubling the exam rooms to six would be desirable, as well as providing additional space to accommodate staff and the waiting area.

He credits the clinic's "beautiful and generous donor base" for providing the medical providers with the freedom to treat patients without meeting the needs of an insurance company.

"The doctors do what they think is right," he said. "You start with people who really need help."



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Technology is an area of expansion, greatly aided by the generous donations of licenses for electronic medical records software from Kareo.

Quest Diagnosis provides laboratory work to the clinic at a discounted rate, another example of partnerships in the community.

“We are focused on how we can use the resources we have in the best way possible and how can we expand our capability to see more patients,” Chuck said. “Technology is one way, but also we’re taking a good hard look at internal operations, how we do things and how we can do them better.”

As the expansion plans develop, the operations committee is developing what might be called a blueprint for the clinic of the future.

One of the questions being considered: Can we use that clinic of the future as a template for free clinics in other communities?

“We’ve been asked by other communities to see if we can help them out,” Chuck said. “The clinic wasn’t built to be a template for other clinics; it was built to fit the space we have. I think we can blend best practices with our incredibly caring local flavor of the clinic we have.”

That caring environment is often recalled in letters from patients, who express their thanks in letters and cards.

“Their stories are heart-wrenching,” Tim said. “You just want to do more.”

The Order of Malta volunteers and staff are focused on their patients.

“Once they leave the clinic, we don’t know what they’re going back to. It’s safe to say it isn’t easy,” Tim said. “If we can help in any way, that’s what we’re here for.” †

**+ FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO MAKE A DONATION:
www.orderofmaltaclinic.com
 And if you’re a health care professional with time to volunteer, the clinic would love to hear from you.**

**NP’s
 RN’s
 LVN’s
 CMA’s
 VOLUNTEER HERE
orderofmaltaclinic.com**

**THE CATHEDRAL OF CHRIST THE LIGHT
 2121 HARRISON STREET OAKLAND CA**





Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland

2121 Harrison St., #100
Oakland, CA 94612



*“Feed my lambs,
feed my sheep”*

**2022 BISHOP’S
MINISTRIES
APPEAL**



Please Support the 2022 Bishop’s Ministries Appeal.

All the funds raised help support the work and vital ministries provided to the parishes and faithful of the Diocese.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”

He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”

Jesus said to Peter the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” *Jn 21:15-17*

www.oakdiocese.org/bishops-ministries-appeal