

# Providing healthcare access to those who need it most

By Caleb Slinkard Transcript Editor | Posted: Friday, October 16, 2015 9:19 pm

Access to healthcare and rising insurance prices are a common conversation topic, both locally and nationally.

For the uninsured, low-income individuals who do not qualify for Medicaid, there aren't a lot of healthcare options available. That's when Variety Care steps in with medical, dental, mental health and pharmacy services, which they provide on a sliding pay scale based on the individual's income and family size.

Variety Care has three locations in Norman, according to CEO Lou Carmichael, which provide various services to the Norman community. Dental services are provided by a clinic in south Oklahoma City, which Variety Care provides transportation to and from for Norman residents.

"The people we serve have absolutely no access to healthcare services, and they need primary care the most so they can get back to work," she said. "They don't have paid time off or sick days, so if they're not getting well, they're not earning money."

Carmichael said Variety Care served 3,000 people last year and are on pace to serve an additional 4,500 this year. With a waiting list a month long, the need is significant.

"The need in Norman is far greater than our resources or capacity," she said. "If people can't get into primary care, they go to the emergency room. They do a wonderful job, but the ER isn't designed to replace primary care services. You're not going to get well going to the ER."

The organization partners with the United Way of Norman, Norman Regional Health System and the Central Oklahoma Community Mental Health Center to help accomplish their mission. The United Way helps fund medical care and dental care for Variety Care clients, and United Way partner agencies can refer individuals to Variety Care, who keeps a block of appointment time open until 1 p.m. each day for such referrals.

"Many of the referrals from our partner agencies are homeless individuals, and we see them at no



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Variety Care has several Norman locations to serve the local community, including this clinic on E. Himes.

charge,” Carmichael said. “We also see poor children with no Medicaid at no charge.”

Variety Care also refers clients internally.

“We do a lot of screenings in our primary care clinics for substance abuse, depression, anxiety, etc.,” she said. “We have people that come in on the primary care side we refer to mental health, and vice versa.”

The majority of Variety Care’s clients are uninsured adults who aren’t far enough below the poverty line to qualify for Medicaid, but they don’t make enough money to qualify for certain health insurance.

“Most of the people we see are somewhere between 80 percent and 120 percent of poverty,” Carmichael said. “The very poor, but they would never have coverage.”

Caleb Slinkard

366-3543

editor@normantranscript.com

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