



**East Brainerd**

# News: Volunteers in Medicine celebrates two years in Chattanooga

By Jennifer Cathey

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It's not even 9 a.m. on a Tuesday, and many of the seats in Volunteers in Medicine, Inc. are already filled with patients.

Patients, explained VIM President Nancy Franks, arrive in the waiting room sometimes a half hour before the clinic opens waiting for their appointments with the volunteer physicians and nurse practitioners working clinic hours.

Before the day begins, however, a local pastor or preacher from a variety of denominations leads a devotional and a prayer. It's been that way since the clinic saw its first patient two years ago this month.

"We believe in providing care to the whole person," Ms. Franks said.

To that end, she explained, VIM has morning devotions, counseling services and medical care that are available to the qualifying public.

It's a fallacy to think of VIM as a "free clinic," Ms. Franks explained, even though the services available are free. The clinic addresses a national problem, the lack of health insurance for working adults who can make ends meet, but can't afford health insurance. The clinic will treat these individuals for free.

Ms. Franks talked about the nature of the problem, and explained that people without health insurance were friends and neighbors.

"Everyone knows someone who doesn't have health insurance," Ms. Franks said.

"We serve people who make up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level," Ms. Franks explained.

Children, Ms. Franks added, aren't served at the clinic because they are covered under TennCare. For the children and their parents, however, there is a reading room where children can play while their parents visit the doctor.

The families can also take home books from the reading room.

Seeds for the VIM clinic were first sown in 2003, when Ms. Franks' church, Ridgedale Baptist, was working on a study of Rick Warren's popular book, "The Purpose Driven Life." Ms. Franks was asked to work on the church's Ridgedale Vision 21 committee, and the idea of a clinic took hold.

Dr. Jack McConnell, the founder of the first VIM clinic in Hilton Head, spoke to interested groups in the Chattanooga area twice.

"He said this had to be a real grassroots effort," Ms. Franks said.

Ms. Franks was inspired by Dr. McConnell. The clinic he opened served as a beacon for the local community and eventually for the international community. Currently there are 58 VIM clinics stateside and two international clinics.

Dr. McConnell was a medical researcher. His illustrious career, Ms. Franks said, included help developing the Tylenol tablet. When he and his wife arrived in Hilton Head in the 1990s, they thought they were retiring.

Instead, the doctor donated his services to those in need — those who worked hard, but didn't have health insurance through their employment and couldn't afford it otherwise.

Since VIM opened in its Eastgate Town Center location in 2005, volunteer doctors, nurses and staff members have helped serve patients during more than 8,000 visits.

VIM's first two years have been successful, and the clinic is proud to be home to a counseling program. Clients coming into the clinic can request or be referred by a doctor, to an interning counselor at the clinic. Like the clinic's other services, the counseling sessions are no cost.

"That was a dream of the center, to have counseling available," Ms. Franks said. "We had to wait a little while to make it possible, though."

Counseling services have been available at VIM for about a year.

The clinic also includes a dispensary to help clients in need of medications receive the full care they need.

"It doesn't do any good to go to the doctor and not get the prescription filled," Ms. Franks said, adding that VIM works with patients to use the dispensary, generic drugs or Prescription Assistance Programs.

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