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## Project links homeless, docs

Uninsured Wake County residents get help finding primary care, specialists



Janet Poindexter, a family nurse practitioner at Horizon Health Center, helps Jimmie Howard. Howard had a visit Monday for his fractured leg and for a pass to remain in a shelter during the day, when rules would normally keep him outside.

*Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy*

By **CHRISTINA JENG**, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- Carl Robinson remembers listening to his friend talk a mile a minute and then feeling light-headed. Robinson's lips started to tingle, and before he knew it there was a crushing pain in his chest.

Later, Robinson, 53, woke up at WakeMed Raleigh Campus and was surprised to see Dr. James Hartye, the doctor who had treated him earlier at a free clinic. It was surprising because Robinson was unemployed, uninsured and homeless, and doctors at free clinics just don't visit you at the hospital.

"It was the first time in years I had a primary health-care physician who was actively involved in my life," Robinson said. "It had been a long time since I had anybody in my life who cared for me."

Robinson was one of 1,089 homeless people in 2004 who benefited from the work of Horizon Health Center, a primary care clinic for the homeless. Horizon Health Center, along with Project Access, a physician referral program for uninsured residents of Wake County, seeks to provide comprehensive health care for people such as Robinson.

In 2003, one in five people under the age of 65, or 1.4 million people in North Carolina, was uninsured. According to the advocacy group National Coalition for the Homeless, access to affordable and high-quality health care can help end homelessness and prevent future episodes of homelessness.

Three years ago, Robinson was on the streets. He was an alcoholic and a substance abuser. He

said he could barely feed himself, let alone remember to take insulin shots twice a day for his diabetes.

That all changed when he checked himself into The Healing Place, a Raleigh homeless shelter, and started going to Horizon Health Center. It provided him with free insulin shots, and when he was hospitalized for chest pains, it set him up with Project Access heart surgeons. Robinson underwent bypass surgery without any thought of the cost.

"I have a lot of people telling me I have as good of a medical treatment as they do with medical insurance," Robinson said.

Horizon Health Center manager Van Ward said, "It's wonderful for me to be able to say to a patient that you get the same care I get, you have access to the same care I have."

Programs such as Horizon Health Center and Project Access developed because physicians and hospitals were frustrated with turning away the uninsured, said Adam Searing, North Carolina Justice Center's health expert.

"They decided to band together," Searing said. "The goal is to open up the entire health-care system for people without insurance."

Project Access specialists include cardiologists, neurologists, endocrinologists and others who pledge a certain amount of time to care for eligible patients.

"One of the problems in the homeless health-care system is getting in touch with specialists like myself," said Dr. Jeffrey Taylor of the Taylor Vitreoretinal Center, a partner of Project Access. Taylor said along with free health care for the uninsured, a goal of the program is to provide preventive care before a small problem becomes a chronic one.

A common problem Taylor sees is diabetic retinopathy, a complication of diabetes that can lead to blindness. According to the National Eye Institute, the disease can develop without symptoms, so it is important that people with diabetes get a comprehensive dilated eye exam at least once a year.

Taylor performed about 10 free eye surgeries in the past year for people who are homeless, at an average of \$5,000 per surgery.

About 25 percent of all of the uninsured in North Carolina received primary care services from safety-net organizations such as Horizon Health Center and Project Access, according to an April 2005 report conducted by a North Carolina Institute of Medicine task force. That is not enough, the task force said.

The group said some private practitioners do not volunteer their services because they may be subject to lawsuits.

However, of those who do provide their services, some go the extra mile.

When Robinson had bypass surgery in 2003, Hartye was there to help him as he recovered.

"He would come by after [work] and visit me in intensive care," Robinson said. "He stayed hours sometimes, just talking. I remember we had some long late-night talks."

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