

# Clinic keeping up with bad times

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Shannon Moline's health insurance company suddenly changed her family's benefits package last year, sending her out-of-pocket health costs soaring. She could no longer afford to take her infant son to his expensive Lincoln Park pediatrician.

"We had this ridiculous bill from them. I didn't love the doctors there anyway, so I was like, 'I don't know what the point is,'" said Moline, a home day-care provider who lives with her accountant husband and 14-month-old David.

She started researching cheaper health care options, closer to home. What she found was the nearly 100-year-old Infant Welfare Society of Chicago, a non-profit maternal and child community health center treating primarily low-income patients on the Northwest Side.

The center, at Fullerton and Central Park Avenues in Logan Square, serves the largely Latino and Polish immigrant population from surrounding neighborhoods. As the economy worsens and more parents lose their jobs and health coverage, the center is bracing for a significant increase in the number of patients like David Moline whose parents can no longer afford pricier pediatricians, said executive director John Wilhelm.

"Growth has been steady. I've just been waiting, because of the economy, to see the uptick," he said.

Illinois Primary Health Care Association President Bruce Johnson said health centers around the state have seen a drastic increase in annual office visits this decade.

"We cannot get these clinics established quickly enough to handle the demand for them," he said.

Johnson said centers like the Infant Welfare Society provide crucial medical access for Illinois' uninsured and underinsured.

"We need to get insurance for everybody, but if you don't have providers in



Shannon Moline discovered the Infant Welfare Society when searching for affordable health care for her son, David. ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Chicago or Illinois that are willing to take those insurance cards ... that really isn't going to help the problem at all," said Johnson. "You have to talk about coverage and access at the same time."

While Moline's son is covered by an HMO, Wilhelm said most of the center's pediatric patients are enrolled in the state's AllKids insurance program. Patients are charged a \$30 co-pay. "We've been aggressive in making sure all the children who come here are enrolled in the program, and therefore we get reimbursed through public aid," he said.

Wilhelm said the center provides services not usually found at a community health center. "We do pediatric dentistry, which includes orthodontics for low-income children," said Wilhelm, who was city health commissioner from 2000 to 2005.

Every patient up to age 6 sees a developmental specialist, in addition to a pe-

diatrician, for early detection of autism and other conditions. The center also offers optometry and mental-health care for patients up to age 18, he said.

Wilhelm said patients often have long waits at some low-income clinics, but not at the Infant Welfare Society.

Patients "need to get in and out quickly," he said. "They take buses. They drag their kids. On the pediatric side, we get patients out within an hour. It all goes into, I think, why we're holding our own." The center had about 2,400 new patients last year, he said.

Moline, 35, said she has been so pleased with the center's service that she plans to be treated there too.

"My physician is down at Northwestern in this big building where you have to pay 20 bucks to park," she said. "I really did like my obstetrician and gynecologist, but since this is right here and I like the doctors, I wouldn't blink at switching."