

Signs of the Times

A Stretched Net

The economic downturn has led to painful layoffs and cutbacks at many Minnesota hospitals and clinics as patients have opted to delay care. But at free clinics and programs for the uninsured, business is booming.

St. Mary's Health Clinics, which provides free medical care to the needy at locations across the Twin Cities, has added 1,500 appointment slots in the east metro. And demand in the western half of

the Twin Cities has increased by almost 50 percent, according to the nonprofit's executive director, Barbara Dickie. The result is longer wait times for appointments. Dickie says St. Mary's has seen another change as well: an increase in the number of patients who've lost insurance because of a job loss.

Demand for free care is also strong at the Phillips Neighborhood Clinic in Minneapolis. About a year ago, the clinic,

which is staffed by University of Minnesota health professions students, extended its hours from one night a week to two and doubled the number of patients as a result. "The need is there," says medical director Brian Sick, M.D. "I'm confident that if we opened more nights a week, we'd fill them."

Although the clinic has traditionally served the uninsured, Sick has noticed that they are now seeing more pa-

tients who have insurance but can't afford their copays. He describes one patient who has multiple chronic illnesses who comes monthly to the Phillips clinic. "He makes just enough money to not qualify [for state insurance programs] but not enough to be able to afford his medications," Sick says. "We do the best we can, but he's certainly not being cared for in the way he should be."

Bill Gray, communications manager for Portico Health-

net, an organization that helps people without insurance access affordable medical care, says he's noticed that people are staying in the program longer because their circumstances aren't improving. "This has resulted in our waiting list growing from six months to near eighteen." Gray expects that new federal grant money will enable Portico to help those waiting for its services.

Art Serotoff, program manager at Sabathani Community Center in Minne-

apolis, is not sure that the economic downturn has had much of an effect on the number of patients coming to the free pediatric clinic at Sabathani. The clinic, which opened in 2007, primarily serves uninsured Latino and African-American families in the south central part of the city. One thing Serotoff has noted is an increasing request by parents for health care for themselves. "Their best resource these days turns out to be the ER," he says. —Carmen Peota