



Photos by Morgan Harper

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New Hope Clinic at Boiling Spring Lakes Telemedicine program aids patients

By Michael Paul
Staff Writer

New Hope Clinic, located in a 4,000 square-foot facility in Boiling Spring Lakes, provides free care to the uninsured in the community five days a week and helps nearly 1,000 patients each year.

The clinic continues to provide medical services and fulfill the pharmacy needs of its patients during the coronavirus pandemic, making some changes that not only protect staff, but continue to ensure the clinic's top-level medical care.

Most important, these changes and others like it statewide are keeping thousands of patients out of already overwhelmed hospital emergency rooms.

"We've definitely had an increase in patients with questions about their symptoms," said Sheila Roberts, executive director of New Hope Clinic.

North Carolina clinics, including New Hope Clinic, are using a new telemedicine program to triage patients at home and determine whether they need to be seen at the clinic or another facility.

Everyone arriving at the clinic is welcomed outside the front door, asked a few questions, and has their temperature checked before entering.

If a patient arrives with respiratory symptoms, the visit will be conducted at the patient's car at the rear of the clinic or over the phone.

If a patient calls, staff will ask questions to determine whether a virtual visit (a secure video-consult with the patient's provider using the patient's smartphone or laptop) is necessary or a possibility. Most visits will be changed to virtual visits for the safety of patients and for volunteers.

Telemedicine now is a go-to resource. The videos are secure, so no one can eavesdrop. Over two weeks in March, at no cost to the clinics, the North Carolina Association of Free & Charitable Clinics set up a specially designed telemedicine program with funds from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.

The association is a private, nonprofit organization that provides advocacy, research, communications, resource development, training and technical assistance on behalf of its 67 clinic organizations and the people they serve.

The grant has also enabled New Hope to set up a testing station behind the clinic.

"So we can see the patient in their car, but we have all the supplies set up outside where we screen the patient," Roberts said April 14.

The telemedicine program allows medical personnel to engage in secure communications with patients outside the clinic through texting and video chats over phones and other devices.

"The most helpful thing that the program brought about was our ability to use telemedicine at our site," Roberts said.

"It helps us keep our patients and our staff and volunteers here safer and still be able to manage care, which in turn helps keep our patients out of the emergency room.

"If primary care offices can't continue to take care of their patients in a safe way, then you end up with someone with something like high blood pressure, which can generally be controlled with medicine, ending up in the emergency room."

New Hope Clinic had not used telemedicine before March 17.

"We have had some challenges with it, but overall it has been so helpful," Roberts said.

"For example, we had a patient who had an open wound and we were able to do regular checkups with him remotely to check that wound by using the video.

"It definitely does not replace an in-person visit," she added. "We hope that we will be able to continue to use this technology even after this pandemic situation, but it would be to supplement the in-person visit with being able to have the video check-ins."

"It's even helped some of our higher-risk volunteer providers, where they could stay at home and we set them up with a secure computer from their home to see the patient in the

patient's home," she said.

Roberts said the clinic's low-income, uninsured patients have transportation problems.

"It's been a nice way to help bridge some of those gaps in transportation," she said.

Statewide since March 16, the clinics have counted more than 3,500 patient interviews through telemedicine, including 2,300 medically related video chats. This process of social distancing reduces the risk of spreading the coronavirus.

By conducting more visits virtually, the clinic will need to have some of its patients monitoring their vitals at home, so donations of digital blood pressure cuffs and thermometers, as well as the regular need for nebulizers and cases of bottles of water, are appreciated.

"About 20-percent of our patients have diabetes," Roberts said, so diabetic supplies also are needed.

"We actually could use a couple more laptops, with at least 8GB of ram, that would help us be a little more complete in our program," Roberts said.

"This has been a good opportunity that has kind of forced some technology on us, which our team is realizing that there's real value to it," Roberts said.

"We knew it existed but we didn't have the financial means to jump into it initially. We're excited to see that there are some grant funds becoming available for us to be able to continue using telemedicine even after the pandemic."

In-patient visits still occur, and the clinic also needs protective wear for its staff.

"We're scrambling for some supplies," Roberts said. "We just got a nice donation from Brunswick Arts Council of some of hand-sewn face masks that we can have some of the staff wear who are not coming in direct contact with the patients and also to give to some of those in higher-risk jobs, like the cashiers."

Roberts said that right now, the clinic's gown supply is low.

Patients are still able to pick up their medications at the Boiling Spring Lakes clinic. A table is set up outside the front door, where medications will be distributed to patients. New Hope Clinic is asking for patients to call for refill requests at least two days ahead, to allow time for review. The clinic will attempt to synchronize as many medications to a 90-day pickup schedule as possible.

New Hope Clinic is temporarily halting its one-on-one diabetes education, weight counseling and pulmonary function testing until further notice.

It also is unable to provide dental services, because of a higher risk of fluid transmission, but individuals may call the clinic if other options for dental care are needed.

"We have taken advantage of this time to reach out to our patients more to educate them about possible respiratory symptoms, how to reduce spread and how to manage symptoms if they get infected — hopefully, reducing the number of visits to the emergency room for non-emergency needs," Roberts said. "By reducing the number of in-person visits, we've also been able to conserve the usage of personal protective equipment and disinfecting supplies, which are in high demand."

"We are so appreciative of the contributions of all our staff, volunteers, donors and community partners during these challenging times," Roberts said. "Whether they are working hard at the clinic or supporting the efforts by safely isolating at home, they are making a difference."

Roberts continues to remain focused on current patients, and she thinks about future patients.

"We're just concerned that there will be an increasing number of people who aren't able to return to work because of the impact on the business community," she said. "We want to make sure we have the support continuing so we can be here for those newly underemployed or uninsured."

New Hope Clinic's current hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Thursday, and 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Friday. Call the clinic at 910-845-5333 for more information..



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