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Roanoke medical clinic plans to serve poor

The Belmont Community Health Center will operate in Southeast Roanoke.

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A group that wants to build the region's second federally subsidized medical clinic has won a \$42,000 grant and hired a project coordinator, steps that bode well for helping the poor and uninsured in Southeast Roanoke live healthier lives.

It could be years before the future Belmont Community Health Center is ready to open. But the hiring of the first employee signals a period of increased visibility and momentum for the project, which is expected to cost more than \$1 million.

It is to be modeled in part after the Kuumba Community Health and Wellness Center. That federally subsidized medical clinic, the Roanoke Valley's first, opened in 2000 in a medically underserved section of Northwest Roanoke and served 2,884 people during its latest fiscal year.

The newest initiative is part of a broad, public-private revitalization effort called Southeast By Design, which is focused on health issues, housing, traffic and crime. Proponents behind the health initiative include the Southeast Roanoke Christian Partnership Community Building Committee and Faith Works in the Roanoke Valley.

Belmont Christian Church minister David Walton said many Southeast residents have felt marginalized for years, but they're more hopeful now that official attention is being paid to their needs. He said the health care center initiative is urgent.

"Something's got to be done. Period," Walton said. "We have this overarching theme of opening a health care clinic for the community."

The city's Southeast quadrant, population 8,000, is disproportionately low-income and home to many elderly, census data shows. Some 40 percent of adults are disabled. For a host of reasons, including lack of insurance and transportation and a shortage of close-by medical facilities, residents routinely don't receive the health care they need, say church and charitable group leaders.

Tom MacMichael sees signs of suffering at the social services agency where he works. He said a Southeast woman went to the emergency room with unbearable pain, only to discover she had advanced cancer.

Dental care is in short supply, too. "We see people down at the Presbyterian Community Center and they have only half the teeth [that are supposed to be] in their mouth," said MacMichael, the center's director of family programs.

MacMichael and colleagues at other church and charitable organizations formed a group in 2002 to expand health services in Southeast. Recently, the group qualified for a \$42,000 Community Development Block Grant from the city of Roanoke. It then contracted with Malora Horn to become the part-time project coordinator. Formerly known as the Southeast Roanoke Healthcare Commission, the group is now known as

Belmont Community Health Center Inc.

Horn is charged with finding out what services are most needed and writing a business plan to construct the clinic. Horn, 40, has 17 years of experience in human services focused on children in need.

"I would like to be able to truly make this a community effort by pulling together different agencies that can help meet the needs of the residents that we will be serving," she said.

Horn has a first-year budget of \$113,000, consisting of the grant, private contributions from charities, church groups and corporate donors and the expected results of upcoming fundraisers and grant applications. Horn will be paid an estimated \$30,000 for 14 months' work, plus additional nongovernmental compensation for fundraising efforts she is expected to undertake, said Brenda Allen, secretary of the Belmont board.

As now conceived, the future clinic would serve those with or without insurance and offer a wide range of health care. A vacant lot adjacent to and owned by Belmont Christian Church, which is supporting the medical initiative, is the planned clinic site. In coming years, the group can apply to the federal government for a construction grant and annual operating subsidy.

Organizers say they want to begin providing at least limited medical services as soon as possible. Toward that end, the Belmont Community Health Center will, in its initial years, be a medical services provider without a permanent home.

In the first of what is expected to be a series of free health events held in the community, the Belmont center and nurse volunteers screened 27 people for high blood pressure and high blood sugar at the Super-D Drug Store at 2152 Dale Ave. S.E. in May.

"It brought some people into the store that might not normally come in here," said Super-D co-owner Bruce Thompson, who said he welcomes the group back and supports its mission.

Immunizations, preschool physicals, nutrition counseling and more screenings are also planned, though details have not been announced.
