

“Did You Get Your Vaccine?” The Answer Is Yes

When Americares Free Clinics staff began receiving the COVID-19 vaccine in December 2020, they each took another shot – a photo of themselves, proudly showing off their bandaged arms. “Did you get your vaccine?” one patient asked Mugnette Maignan, clinic director of Americares Free Clinic of Stamford, when he saw her image posted in an exam room. “Well then, I’m going to get it too.”

Posters and conversations were just one way Americares Free Clinics made vaccinations easy and possible for their patients. Free clinics staff knew that in early 2021, patients faced many barriers on their way to vaccination. Connecticut’s Vaccine Administration Management System (VAMS) required access to the internet and a computer or smart phone as well as literacy in English and the ability to navigate an online form.

When Stamford Hospital created a no-barriers vaccine clinic, it reserved slots for Americares Free Clinics patients, and staff began phoning patients. “We called every active Stamford patient and more than 250 were scheduled,” says Karen Gottlieb. “It set the stage for everyone to realize how important it was to meet the patients where they were in terms of accessing the vaccine.” When the age range expanded, the clinic also scheduled patients’ friends and families. “We were able to help a community larger than our patients,” Gottlieb says.



The wait is over: In a partnership with the city of Bridgeport, Americares Free Clinics patients received COVID-19 vaccinations at the clinic in April 2021.

The Free Clinics’ close ties to each of the four communities in Fairfield County were critical. “We participated in weekly meetings with the departments of health and the hospitals,” says Gottlieb. “The success was due to the community.” Clinics staff also directed patients to free testing sites.

Free Clinics’ staff let the Danbury health department know about the success of the Stamford no-barriers system and the city created its own, with vaccination clinics in Rodgers Park and other locations. Danbury clinic staff called patients and close to 200 patients received protective shots. In Norwalk, staff contacted 380 patients to schedule them at Norwalk Community Health Center and the Department of Health. In Bridgeport, more than 230 patients received vaccinations, including 91 at the Americares Free Clinic building, opened on a Sunday for a vaccination event hosted by Bridgeport Department of Health staff and volunteers.



By combining staff vaccinations with patient education and support for testing and vaccination, Americares Free Clinics helped protect their patients during the pandemic and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the communities they serve.



Americares Free Clinics staff guided patients through the vaccination process — including receiving their all-important vaccination card.

Staff turned their own vaccination selfies into posters that encouraged patients to also get the shot.



From the
Executive Director

Is it over yet?

COVID-19 is the pandemic we were warned about, and for too many people — including my AmeriCares colleagues in other states and countries — the outbreak continues.

But here in Fairfield County, vaccination rates are high, which protects the population, and we can begin to take a look back at our pandemic year. Here are critical steps we took to save lives and keep our community safe.

- We closed our doors but didn't stop services. Stopping the flow of traffic in our clinics helped protect staff and patients from the coronavirus.
- We provided care for those affected by COVID-19. For patients with COVID-19 symptoms, we provided thermometers, masks and more; for those few who were hospitalized, we acted as advocates.
- We pivoted to telehealth and learned a lot. For some patients, care is better on a video chat — it's more convenient and of equal quality. So, like many health care providers, we will keep telehealth in our arsenal of patient services.
- We partnered throughout the community to be efficient and effective. To keep our patients safe and well, we connected them with testing and vaccination services in their communities, which are also our communities. These connections to local hospitals and departments of health run deep and are critical.

Most important was you: You made everything possible — whether you're a volunteer, donor, partner or staff member. Your support for AmeriCares Free Clinics played an essential role in keeping this community safe.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Karen Gottlieb

Karen Gottlieb

Electronic Health Records Deliver



Jennifer DaSilva, Clinic Director of the Fred Weisman Free Clinic staff in Bridgeport, uses the telephone and video conferencing to meet patients' needs during the pandemic.

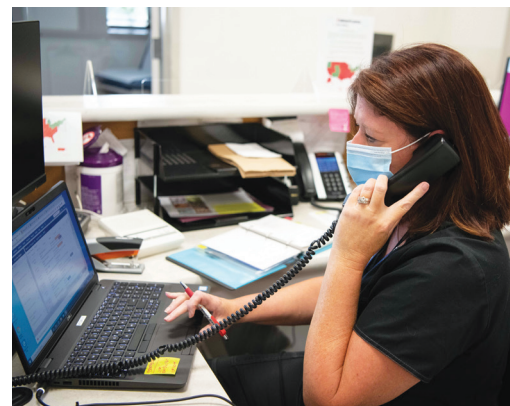
When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Fairfield County, the Fred Weisman AmeriCares Free Clinic of Bridgeport was just months away from switching from paper to an electronic health record. Director of Clinical Operations Janet Yon quickly realized that EHR would be critical for patients and staff during the pandemic, and launching the system became an urgent priority.

Working under strict COVID-19 safety protocols, the Bridgeport team scanned hundreds of patient records — including test results, lab records and provider notes — and, in April 2020, the clinic's EHR launched. Bridgeport staff then shared their skills and knowledge with staff at the other AmeriCares Free Clinics and now, Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free Clinic of Danbury also has an EHR, and the Bob Macauley Free Clinic of Norwalk's EHR is due to launch in fall of 2021. The Stamford clinic has always used an electronic health record.

Electronic health records feature more than just digital records of a patient's medical care. AmeriCares Free Clinics providers can schedule telehealth appointments on the platform — and exchange messages with other staff about patient records in real time. Patients benefit: AmeriCares Free Clinics specialty providers can meet with patients from clinics other than the one clinic where they traditionally volunteer.

The electronic health record used by AmeriCares Free Clinics also allows providers to email or text message select groups of patients. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Connecticut, AmeriCares Free Clinics staff used the messaging service to alert patients to the availability of COVID tests and vaccines.

"COVID brought the clinics together, and the electronic health record further united us," says Yon. "I'm chomping at the bit to set up learning collaboratives for the clinics, once each is on the platform. Each month, we can have staff and volunteers listen to guest speakers and share knowledge — we won't just train staff how to use the electronic health record. We'll keep educating ourselves and stay current."



Director of Clinical Operations Janet Yon followed protocols — wearing a mask and contacting patients and staff by telephone — during the pandemic.

Clinics Welcome Volunteers

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Fairfield County, AmeriCare Free Clinics made a rapid pivot to telehealth. To keep patients, staff and volunteers safe, the Clinics transitioned appointments to phone calls and video chats. Small and efficient teams — buoyed by just a few volunteer providers and interpreters — kept the clinics open and treating patients. Volunteers are the heart of AmeriCare Free Clinics. Skilled volunteers provide medical care to and interpret for the clinics' nearly 3,000 patients. By early July in Fairfield County, nearly 80 percent of people age 18 and over had received at least one vaccine shot, and clinic staff began to welcome volunteers back into the clinics.

"We're slowly bringing volunteers back in person," says Director of Volunteer Services and Community Outreach Terri McCartney. "Our volunteers missed being in the clinics, and our patients missed having them there. The one-on-one connection patients have with In-person volunteer doctors, nurses and interpreters at the clinic serves to strengthen the patient experience."



Volunteer Pat Porio, RN, and Gail Banigan, Norwalk clinic patient care coordinator, enjoyed a moment together at the 2019 AmeriCare volunteer celebration.

If you're interested in volunteering with AmeriCare Free Clinics, please visit americarefreeclinics.org.

With Your Support: A Camera That Saves Eyesight

Quality diabetes care includes retina screening: Diabetes can damage the retina, and annual eye screenings are critical to prevent partial vision loss or blindness. More than 400 AmeriCare Free Clinics patients have diabetes and need regular eye exams.

The Free Clinics recently purchased four Welch Allyn RetinaVue cameras, which make screenings available at all four Free Clinics — an ophthalmologist need not be present. Trained clinics staff use the camera, capture the image and send it electronically to a volunteer ophthalmologist for analysis. The results appear in each patient's electronic health record automatically — saving time and ensuring quality, current medical records.

For 10 years, Dr. Arnold Pearlstone provided ophthalmologic exams; his passing in 2020 left a gap.



Just after training, staff demonstrated the Welch Allyn RetinaVue camera, which transmits the patient's eye exam results to a volunteer ophthalmologist for analysis.



This new technology will provide access to quality eye care to patients with diabetes at all four AmeriCare clinics.

Free Clinics

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“For Us, Health Is Life”

COVID-19 left a deep scar on Ana* and Matteo's lives: Ana's stepfather died from the disease. “He kept saying that his insurance didn't cover everything, and it was too expensive,” says Ana.

There were other losses, too: Both Ana and Matteo became unemployed because of the pandemic. With their two teenage children, the couple followed protocols to stay safe, even as they wondered about their future. “It was a really hard situation,” says Ana. The couple married and immigrated from Guatemala more than 10 years ago and have been part of the Bridgeport community ever since. That includes being patients at the Fred Weisman AmeriCares Free Clinic of Bridgeport.

“We were already researching where to go to get the vaccine when the clinic called,” says Matteo. “They always have us in mind — not just in terms of health care, but in our lives as well.” The couple received both shots from the Bridgeport Department of Health at the AmeriCares Free Clinic in Bridgeport.

Being vaccinated has delivered many benefits. “It gave me the opportunity to have a job again,” says Ana, who needed the immunization for her new job at a deli. And Matteo is now working as a landscaper and tree trimmer. “The day of my



vaccination was also my birthday,” says Matteo. “I felt like it was truly a divine gift to receive it. It's a new opportunity – to be at peace, enjoy the family and see an opportunity for the future.”

“It may sound like a cliché,” says Ana. **“But for us, health is life.”**

*names changed for privacy