

## New Staff Role Strengthens Clinic Teams

**There are new faces at each of Americares Free Clinics — and they're filling a new role: medical assistant. Think of the new staff members as professional patient guides who complete patient intake, conduct basic tests, and help with phone calls and screening as well as telehealth. An added plus: The assistants are bilingual.**

The Free Clinics have had the benefit of volunteers to handle many of these duties, but as volunteer hours have decreased since the pandemic began, Americares clinic directors and nursing staff found themselves short staffed and increasingly busy. “The medical assistant strengthens our team,” says Jennifer DaSilva, director, Americares Weisman Free Clinic of Bridgeport. “Now we can each manage our patient care more efficiently, and the flow of the clinic is more fluid.” Currently, the medical assistants are Tatyana Aguirre in Bridgeport, Cina Ferreira in Danbury, Clara Gonzalez in Stamford and Paulina Gonzalez in Norwalk.

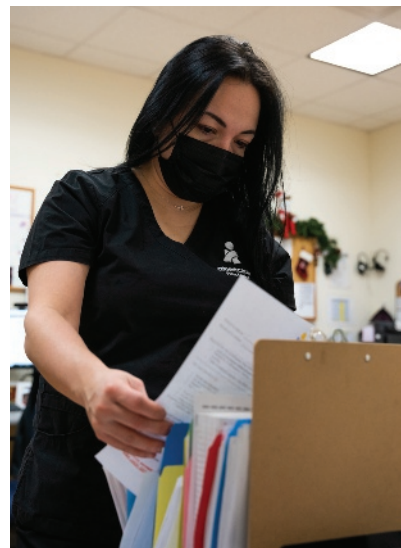
The clinic directors experience the benefits every day. “Directors are not only responsible for the nursing component but also daily operations, which are multifaceted,” says DaSilva. “For example, with the medical assistants on board, we can more easily spend time away from the clinic in meetings with our community care partners.”

The medical assistants are also helping the clinics move into their new practice model, made possible by electronic health records. Now, patients at all four clinics can access a robust audiovisual telehealth platform through AthenaNet, our electronic health record platform. In order for the system to work effectively, it is crucial patients understand how to access it on their smartphone, and medical assistants are experts. “Our medical assistant has also spearheaded our RetinaVue program,” says DaSilva. The assistant uses the RetinaVue equipment to screen patients for diabetic retinopathy and sends the images to the ophthalmologist for reading.

“Every day I learn something new,” says Tatyana Aguirre, who brings over a decade of experience as a medical assistant to



Tatyana Aguirre is one of four new medical assistants at Americares Free Clinics playing a critical role in patient care and clinic administration.



her role. “I’ve gotten to know my patients and families and the hardships they face.” When she is able, Aguirre helps patients address social determinants of health — barriers to health such as transportation or food insecurity. The value of quality, compassionate care is important to her. “My parents are immigrants, and I wish someone would have

helped my mother in this way when she needed medical treatment,” says Aguirre, “even just someone to speak with.”



From the  
**Executive Director**  
AmeriCares Free Clinics

## Volunteer Experience: “If They Called Me Tonight, I’d Go Again”

Dr. Howard Eison considers his weekly volunteer hours at the Bob Macauley AmeriCares Free Clinic of Norwalk the best part of his week. But when he received an email late one night in August describing a volunteer opening with AmeriCares, he recognized a unique opportunity to help others and quickly answered, “yes.”

Within 48 hours, Dr. Eison was in Germany, helping more than 300 Afghan refugees on board a flight to the United States. Each one had fled Afghanistan, waiting days at the airport for a flight out. Dr. Eison was the sole physician during the flight, and he and a volunteer nurse treated many passengers for dehydration, stomach issues, headaches, chest pain and other ailments. More than a quarter of the passengers were children; one 5-year-old needed immediate assistance upon landing. AmeriCares placed six medical professionals on other similar flights.

When he looked at the hundreds of evacuees, Dr. Eison saw anxiety for the future on many faces and realized he was witnessing the tumultuous beginning of new lives in the United States. Many of the patients he serves at the AmeriCares Free Clinic in Norwalk share a similar story.

“I found a connection with these families heading to the U.S. from their country,” says Dr. Eison. “They were totally lost and hoping to be found.”

AmeriCares vets and trains emergency response professionals who can be available during emergencies. Dr. Eison is one of 750 medical and emergency response experts from 52 countries on AmeriCares global roster; six roster members were deployed on flights similar to Dr. Eison’s. Dina Valenti, director of the Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free



Dr. Howard Eison (top) expanded his volunteerism by serving on a flight bringing Afghan refugees to the United States.

Clinic of Danbury, was also deployed this year to help with a shortage of staff at a tribal clinic in Oklahoma.

Whether he is in the clinic or on a plane full of refugees, Dr. Eison helps provide an essential medical safety net for people who need it most. “I have skills that I’ve acquired over the years, and if I can use them in any way, at any time, anywhere, it’s my duty. It’s not even a duty; duty implies it’s something I have to do. It’s what I want to do,” says Dr. Eison. As for his experience on the rescue flight, “If they called me tonight, I’d go again.”

**Dear Friends,**

As we begin the new year, I focus on what’s ahead for AmeriCares Free Clinics. And there’s a lot to be excited about: new medical assistants, electronic health records at all four clinics and telehealth truly increasing access to health services for many of our patients are just a few.

I also reflect on the past year, of course, and 2021 provided a lot of food for thought. The COVID-19 vaccines are something we are all thankful for. I also remember the patients — four at last count — whom we lost to COVID-19. Our hearts go out to their loved ones.

The brightest part of my year — and of every day — is AmeriCares Free Clinics amazing staff. In the two years of this pandemic, our services have never stopped, and that is because of the dedication, professionalism and compassion of our staff and volunteers. No matter the barrier (and there were many), we worked together to find creative solutions. We kept each other and our patients safe and well.

By supporting AmeriCares Free Clinics, you are part of this amazing team, and I want to thank you. We are a caring community, and we act on that every day. Our patients experience the impact of our actions. But I like to think that our influence goes farther: When we save lives and improve health, we prove that we can make a difference.

Thank you for being a partner in our mission.

Karen Gottlieb  
Executive Director



## Free Clinics Leadership Presents at Global Conference

There's more to telehealth appointments than a phone call. AmeriCares Free Clinics have managed telehealth appointments since March 2020 and are now sharing their expertise and experience to help other health centers better serve patients. In November 2021, AmeriCares Free Clinics Executive Director Karen Gottlieb and Director of Clinical Operations Janet Yon presented to an international audience at the HealthCare Accreditation Council conference and Exhibition, based in Jordan.

"We described how telehealth is different — what clinicians and patients need to know," says Yon. Without a hands-on exam, for example, the patient and provider can exchange other information. "Our experience here in Fairfield County is of value to health centers around the world," says Yon. Gottlieb and Yon discussed the digital divide — that is, the absence of technology, reliable internet and digital literacy among low-income patients: Fifty percent don't have a smartphone, and as many as 65 percent of people over 65 have no computer. The pair also covered the future of



Staff at the Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free Clinic of Danbury celebrate going live with electronic health records, which support telehealth.

telehealth, which will have value beyond the pandemic. The recorded session happened in the morning in Jordan, which was 2 a.m. Connecticut time. Gottlieb and Yon attended virtually and answered questions live.

## Behind the Data: Free Clinic Staff Shines

When Laura Galusha started at AmeriCares Free Clinics in 1994, the only software program for clinics was designed for patient billing. But because the clinics don't charge patients and often send patients to partners for no-cost services, Galusha worked with staff to expand the program, transferring every patient interaction from paper records into the billing software.

The payoff is huge: For decades, Galusha and the Free Clinics team have been able to pull and sort data to show patients' journeys to improved health and, just as important, estimate the value of services the clinics provide, years ahead of other free and charitable clinics in the country. "At conferences, we could present data no one else could," says Karen Gottlieb, "and that's because of the work that Laura Galusha did."

Galusha came to AmeriCares just after completing her Master of Public Health at SUNY Albany, first as a volunteer, tracking shipments of medicine and medical supplies. But when AmeriCares opened its first clinic, Galusha dedicated her hours to the Free Clinic. "It was exciting — would patients come? Would they stay?" she says. "We celebrated every milestone."

As the clinics grew, with patients and their care becoming more complex, Galusha kept pushing the software, switching as older programs became obsolete. She also applied her passion for the clinics' mission to help others, and her

admiration grew for her coworkers who, like her, strive for excellence. "The Free Clinics are such a creative, caring place," says Galusha. "We're always searching for more and better ways to help patients."

In late 2021, Galusha reduced her hours to work as a third-grade teacher in her hometown of Fairfield, where she raised two boys. The school is connected to Galusha's church, another passion in her life. Even with her new career in education, Laura's love of the program and dedication to the patients we serve keep her coming back. Currently, Gottlieb and Galusha are pulling data sets to see factors that might affect diabetic patients' A1C levels, data that is foundational to achieving health equity.

Now, the clinics' adoption of electronic health records will make such data analysis easier. But the Free Clinics have enjoyed data insights for decades, all with the help of basic billing software and anything-but-basic creative thinkers.



**Laura Galusha**



## Free Clinics

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## Your Gift Makes Health Possible

During the pandemic, AmeriCares Free Clinics have been able to provide continuous care to patients because of its robust telehealth program. Free Clinics patients don't have the luxury of paid time off; telehealth is of extra benefit to them. Here's what patients are saying about AmeriCares telehealth appointments.

"I am a fisherman and work long days on a boat. I no longer have to take a full day off from work to go to the clinic — I even sent the nurses some photos from the water!"

"I work at a fast-food chain restaurant. When I am on my telehealth visit, my provider sees me in my uniform and hears the noise of the restaurant clatter, but I do not have to take a day off."

"I can call from my client's house in the middle of cleaning. All I have to do is stop the vacuum and find a quiet spot. Then I can resume my work and bring home money to feed my family."

"I can call from in between my landscaping assignments. Now I don't have to leave the crew and take the whole day off, but just step aside for my telehealth visit."

"My kids are home from school, and I don't have a babysitter. "Seeing" the provider from home has saved me the expense of a babysitter and doesn't interrupt my children's day."

"I have my glucometer to monitor my blood sugar and was given a blood pressure monitor so I can keep the doctor up to date with my values. This also reminds me to take better care of myself."

"I feel like the clinic really cares about protecting me. Not having to take the bus to get to the clinic [during the pandemic] makes me feel safer."