

Your Support at Work: Patients Are Positive About Telehealth During Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unimaginable cascade of events, including a complete disruption in how care was delivered to the patients at AmeriCares Free Clinics. When the pandemic was declared in the United States in March 2020, AFC halted face-to-face visits with patients and quickly pivoted to a telehealth platform. Providers and patients spoke by phone and, when patients had a smart phone, by video chat.

For six months, this new model of health care delivery was the only way AFC staff could provide patients with continuity of care. When in-person visits resumed in late 2020, telehealth didn't go away. AFC staff developed a hybrid model that uses both onsite visits and telehealth.

AFC staff wanted to know how beneficial this hybrid model is. Under the direction of AFC's Director of Clinical Operations, Janet Yon RN, DNP, AFC conducted a retrospective evaluation of the telehealth platform. Bridgeport Clinic patients and staff were surveyed to determine if the new care delivery model was beneficial to the free clinics, staff and patients over the 12-month pandemic period. This evaluation is in alignment with AFC's mission to ensure that quality of care is maintained and pathways to health are achieved. The survey covered reliability, usefulness, effectiveness, ease of use, satisfaction and service utilization. The result: Staff and patients responded positively on all measures.

"As an alternative to face-to-face visits, it is clear telehealth will be a part of our care model going forward," says AmeriCares Free Clinics Executive Director Karen Gottlieb. "It is a critical time for us to evaluate these systems by collecting information on the quality and perceptions of the telehealth platform so we can determine where and how to improve upon it."



AmeriCares Free Clinics now use a hybrid care model that includes providing in-person care like this patient visit. Inset: Director of Clinical Operations Janet Yon leads the evaluation of the telehealth program.

Though the survey covered just one of four AFC locations, "telehealth has proven its ability to supplement access to care during the pandemic," Yon says. Yon and AFC staff will now replicate this survey in the three other AFC clinics. In the future, this focus on monitoring and evaluating quality of care will be expanded to other clinical parameters. "Our newly implemented electronic medical record contains a wealth of information," says Yon. "We will be able to measure the impact and quality of many of our health programs just as we are doing with telehealth."



From the
Executive Director
Americares Free Clinics

New Medical Director in Bridgeport

Dr. Joseph Rosa has been named medical director of the Fred Weisman Americares Free Clinic of Bridgeport.



In his new volunteer role, Rosa will provide guidance on clinic policies and procedures, support volunteer recruitment and serve as an advocate within the community.

“Volunteering at the Americares Bridgeport clinic has been a very rewarding experience and I look forward to making an even greater impact as the clinic’s volunteer medical director,” says Rosa.

Rosa is a practicing endocrinologist for Yale New Haven Health’s Northeast Medical Group in Trumbull and is affiliated with Bridgeport Hospital and St. Vincent’s Medical Center. He began volunteering at the Fred Weisman Americares Free Clinic of Bridgeport in 2021 to help meet the health needs of the clinic’s low-income, uninsured patients.

New Chair for Americares Free Clinics Board of Directors

In June, Jeffrey T. Becker was voted in as Chair of Americares Free Clinics board of directors. Becker is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Jennison Associates, an investment manager of PGIM, the global investment management businesses of Prudential Financial, Inc. Prior to joining Jennison, he served as Chief Executive Officer of Voya Investment Management and as a member of Voya Financial’s Executive Committee. Before Voya Financial’s spin-off from ING, Becker was CEO of ING Investment Management Americas, where he previously held numerous executive positions with the firm, including vice chairman, chief operating and chief financial officer. Becker earned a Bachelor of Arts in economics from Colgate University and a Master of Business Administration in finance from New York University’s Stern School of Business. Becker is also a member of the Americares Foundation, Inc. board, which he joined in 2014.



Dear Friends,

It is a very busy time at Americares Free Clinics.

We are slowly accepting new patients. And we know that nearly every patient, whether new or familiar, enters our clinics with complex health conditions. We care for people with diabetes, who require specialized eye and foot care, for example, and patients with resistant hypertension, who need multiple medications.

To meet the complex health needs of more patients with quality health care, we must continuously evolve — and we are!

In just this newsletter alone, we’re updating you on just some of the innovative ways Americares Free Clinics is changing. On page 1, you can read about the continuing success of our hybrid care model. On page 2, we’re excited to share that AFC is a partner of 4-CT Direct Cash Aid. Connections with other like-minded organizations in Connecticut like 4-CT are critical — we all learn from and support each other, building a true community of caring and support for our neighbors.

More patients also require more staff, and increasingly complex health conditions require a switch from mostly volunteer to mostly paid staff. This transition began before the pandemic and will continue. The challenges to recruit medical staff are great throughout the country, and Fairfield County is no exception.

Our success in meeting these challenges is only possible because of your support. Thank you for being part of a caring community here in Connecticut.

Karen Gottlieb
Executive Director



Patient Care Coordinator Gail Banigan celebrates at her retirement party after 15 years of service.

Celebrate: Gail Banigan

In June, longtime Americares Free Clinic staff and volunteer Gail Banigan retired. Most recently the patient care coordinator at the Bob Macauley Free Clinic of Norwalk, Banigan worked as a volunteer or paid staff member for 15 years, helping countless patients access health care. This summer, Norwalk clinic staff gathered and celebrated Banigan. “As an advocate, I was able to get things done and help people who otherwise weren’t going to get their medication. It’s a place of good people doing good work,” says Banigan.

Veronica Sullivan, Norwalk Clinic Director, says, “I cannot express how appreciative we are of what Gail brought to our team. Her relentless drive and commitment to our clinic has helped our patients consistently obtain services. Gail’s positive attitude, resourcefulness and kindness will be greatly missed. Genuine dedication and loyalty are rare, which is why Gail will always have a special place in our hearts. We wish Gail a healthy and enjoyable retirement.”



Americares Free Clinic staff fill out grant requests to provide cash awards for Connecticut patients in need.

AFC has been a partner since the beginning: The first phase of the cash card distribution focused on undocumented residents in need. Beginning in March 2021, 4-CT expanded the program to include general emergency assistance. Then, in January 2022, 4-CT made it easier for AFC to quickly provide the cash cards when it made AFC a 4-CT Direct Cash Aid partner. As a partner, AFC staff can fill out a form for a patient — basically a grant request — then give the one-time cash award to the patient.

“This phase was especially welcomed as the process was expedited and allowed cards to be distributed directly to patients in need,” says Americares Free Clinics Executive Director Karen Gottlieb. Previously, patients had to visit another location to pick up the cards. Since the program’s onset, Americares Free Clinics has provided \$360,000 in cash cards to patients across its four locations.

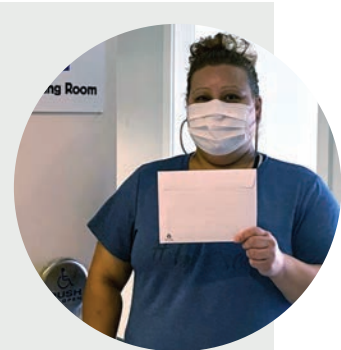
4-CT was founded in 2020 by philanthropists throughout the state as a response to the pandemic and endorsed by Governor Ned Lamont.

Americares Free Clinics Partners for Direct Cash Aid to Patients

\$400: For 49 percent of Americans with children under 18, \$400 cash is an impossible amount to raise quickly in an emergency — for medicine, medical supplies, groceries or a utility bill, for example. Yet, that sum can be critical for a person’s health and well-being.

Since June 2020, the organization 4-CT has distributed cash cards to people in Connecticut who are in need and affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. 4-CT’s nonprofit partners include Americares Free Clinics.

“I will be able to pay the gas bill which provides heat for my home,” says one AFC patient who received a cash card. “I will buy food and a 90-day supply of medication with this card. I am so grateful for the aid received during this difficult time.”



“I’m asking because I care about them. I’m asking for their health.”

Addiction often hides behind a myriad of other symptoms. Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment, known as SBIRT, is an evidence-based approach health providers can use to intervene and treat patients who use alcohol and other drugs at risky levels. By asking patients a brief series of questions, providers can learn if the patient needs a referral for substance use treatment. The SBIRT screening allows providers to effectively identify, then intervene and refer patients to treatment while addressing patients’ other health concerns. All four Americares Free Clinics are now providing SBIRT training.

“The goal of the SBIRT training is screening,” says Mary Beth Fessler, a nurse at the Bob Macauley Americares Free Clinic of Norwalk. “You don’t realize its importance until you discover your patients have problems with substance abuse.” Fessler worked with a patient for months who had asthma and had recently dealt with homelessness. Only after she applied the SBIRT screening did Fessler understand the role alcohol played in exacerbating his asthma and housing insecurity. The knowledge gained through SBIRT allows Fessler and other providers to adjust treatment to best fit patients’ needs. “As health care professionals, we need to know about substance use because it affects patients’ health. We do need to know their habits,” says Fessler. “I’m asking because I care about them. I’m asking for their health.”



Nurse practitioner Gisela Lamour is one of the many Americares Free Clinic staff who received SBIRT training.

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A Patient's Story: Abigail

"I was so ill when I first came to the clinic," says Abigail, who first sought care from Bob Macauley AmeriCares Free Clinic of Norwalk in 2017. "I had high sugar levels, high cholesterol. It was difficult." Abigail, known as AJ, was quickly referred to the clinic's volunteer endocrinologist and diagnosed with diabetes.

AJ knew she needed more than medicine to control her diabetes, and clinic staff helped her access a range of care: She began treatment with insulin and cholesterol medication, enrolled in the clinic's health coach program and attended diabetes education classes at Norwalk Hospital. "People with diabetes like me may not be able to purchase medications, but I can get them at the clinic," says AJ. "And every time I visit, the doctor teaches me how to eat better." In the five years since AJ first

visited, she has lowered her average blood sugar level, known as A1C, by 50 percent.

"My hope for the future is to have even better control of my diabetes," says AJ, who lives with her young son. "Diabetes affects the job I choose. I want to get a better job, but then I think about what will happen if I get sick and can't go, so I don't. I know many people struggle with this."

During the pandemic, AJ's childcare job abruptly ended, creating financial pressure. The Norwalk clinic provided her with a 4-CT cash card. "It was a big help," says AJ. "I couldn't work, but I was able to feed my son."

Through AJ's diabetes and the pandemic, the Norwalk clinic continues to be a resource. "I just want to thank



you for everything you've done for me," says AJ. "I feel secure getting my medication and I'm grateful for learning to eat better and receiving more information about my diabetes. I am thankful to everyone in this clinic."