

## Patients Show They Care — With Their Voice

**Patients are why Americares Free Clinics exist: Our mission is to improve the health of the people we serve. To that end, we strive to involve patients in all decisions about their health — an approach known as patient-centered care, which, along with dignity and respect, is the highest standard in health care.**

“Our programs and services must be designed not just for patients, but with them,” says Americares Free Clinics Executive Director Karen Gottlieb. Americares Free Clinics has begun using a new approach, going beyond surveys to roundtable meetings with patient representatives, to ensure that patients’ point of view is included in all aspects of the clinics. In the group sessions, patients can comment on every aspect of their lives, from the health services they receive to experiences in the community. The program is called Patient Voice. The goal is for each of the four Americares Free Clinics to have active Patient Voice groups; by mid-year 2023, two clinics had held group sessions.

Bertha, a patient at the Stamford Americares Free Clinic for five years, values her place in the Patient Voice group. She says, “I’m here to talk for other patients. Like me, they have health issues. I feel I am the voice for them.” Patients turned down payment or remuneration of any sort for taking part — participation is made generously, a give-back to the organization that provides so much for them.

The Patient Voice sessions are facilitated by Catalina Samper-Horak, an Americares Free Clinics board member who has a deep understanding of the needs of low-income immigrants and experience working with this vulnerable population across Connecticut. “This reaffirms for the clinic staff what they are doing well and can also reveal gaps or issues they are not aware of. Patients will be more likely to voice them in the group sessions,” says Samper-Horak, adding: “The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.”

Patients spoke about the value of the connections Americares Free Clinics has with other health providers and partners.



With the introduction of formal Patient Voice groups, patients like Bertha (above right) know their point of view is incorporated into every aspect of Americares Free Clinics operations.

“Without our connection to local hospitals, they would have huge bills or go without care,” says Gottlieb. The partnership with 4-CT that provided cash cards for groceries during the COVID-19 pandemic was “life-changing,” patients said, as many lost work and income and were going hungry.

There were requests: more explanation about why treatments or vaccines are needed — the shingles vaccine, for example; more mental health support; and more explanation of income qualifications — one patient worried about losing eligibility once her child was over 18 and no longer a dependent.

The conversations were wide-ranging: Samper-Horak was impressed to hear patients tell of their strong ties to the community. “People described having been in the country 10 or 15 years on average,” she says. “They call Connecticut home.”



From the  
**Executive Director**  
AmeriCares Free Clinics

## New Clinic Director in Bridgeport



Karitza Melendez knows the Bridgeport community well and is now the director of the AmeriCares Free Clinic there.

Registered nurse Karitza Melendez is now the director of the Fred Weisman AmeriCares Free Clinic of Bridgeport. In her new role, Melendez oversees the day-to-day operations of the clinic, which serves an average of 400 low-income, uninsured individuals in the greater Bridgeport area each year.

“It is an honor to serve our patients and lead our team as we continue to build a medical home where patients feel respected and valued and receive quality health care. As director, I will continue to work toward bridging the gap to ensure our community receives the care it deserves and has the right to receive,” says Melendez.

“We are so proud to welcome Karitza to this position,” says Karen Gottlieb, executive director, AmeriCares Free Clinics. “Karitza is a skilled and knowledgeable health care professional and brings her heart to work with her each day.”

Melendez previously served as the Bridgeport clinic’s assistant director. Before joining AmeriCares Free Clinics, Melendez was the lead patient experience associate and a registered nurse at Bridgeport Hospital.

### Dear Friends,

In the 28 years since our founding, AmeriCares Free Clinics has grown and changed. If you’ve been with us on this entire journey or are new to our model of care, here’s one key statistic: More than 28,000 people in Fairfield County, Conn., have benefitted from the quality health care AmeriCares Free Clinics provides at no cost, health services valued at more than \$141 million.

We are always looking for new ways to provide our patients with more resources. And we’re finding them: In this newsletter, you will learn how patients and providers have access to a statewide network of medical specialists, which results in better care. Both patients and providers benefit. And in these pages, you’ll meet new staff members, the absolute best of our communities, who have stepped forward to lead our clinics and serve Fairfield County.

We provide our health services with kindness and warmth. AmeriCares Free Clinics patients have complex lives with many challenges, often working 60 to 80 hours a week but still unable to afford health care.

AmeriCares Free Clinics works for our community — to make everyone in Fairfield County healthier. Our neighbors’ health matters. We are proud to provide care to improve health equity in the communities where we live.

Thank you for supporting AmeriCares Free Clinics.

Karen Gottlieb

Executive Director

## Back-to-School: Volunteer Pitch-In

Children in AmeriCares Free Clinics community will start school this fall with new school supplies — and a backpack to carry them in. Volunteers gathered in Stamford this summer to fill the backpacks. AmeriCares Leadership Council organized the event, and many brought their own children, making this a family event.

“This is one way we can make sure children in our community are starting school with what they need,” says Vanessa Bendenelli, AmeriCares director of individual philanthropy. “AmeriCares Free Clinics is a helpful resource for people living with low incomes in Fairfield County.”



Volunteers of all ages helped with packing.

## Specialty Care is Fast — and as Close as a Computer



Americares Free Clinics Director of Medical Services Dr. Debra Gerson (right) reviews patient information with Medical Assistant Paulina Gonzalez before the files are sent to medical specialists for review.

When Dr. Deb Gerson, Americares Free Clinics director of medical services, began treating a patient with a new case of type 2 diabetes, she noted his case was unusual: He was young, not overweight and had no family history of diabetes. Reviewing his chart, she noticed the results from a recent abdominal scan for an unrelated issue were also unusual: There were iron deposits in his liver and pancreas.

Dr. Gerson didn't have to wait to find out if the deposits were related to the diabetes: Within 48 hours, she knew the best next steps for her patient. Better: Her patient didn't need to travel to another doctor. Instead, his charts and scans made the trip to a specialist — via ConferMED, an eConsult program made available to Americares Free Clinics through an affiliation with ConferMED and the Quest Diagnostics Foundation.

Using a secure platform, health providers like Dr. Gerson are able to quickly connect one-on-one with specialists across Connecticut. Providers speak to each other via an online dashboard over which they can securely share medical records and reports.

"The wait for many of our specialists can be months. This gets us answers quickly, and it frees up specialists to see patients who are most in need of their care," says Dr. Gerson. "My questions are answered within 48 hours, so I'm able to get

back to the patients and let them know the next step." Through the program, Americares Free Clinics patients can continue to see their Americares Free Clinic primary care provider — a medical provider they already know and trust. Patients avoid common barriers to specialty care like cost, travel challenges and having to use an interpreter. As an added benefit, Americares providers learn new ways to treat patients.

Dr. Gerson's patient is just one of many Americares Free Clinics staff and patients who have benefitted from the program. Since its adoption in March, Americares Free Clinic providers have consulted over 55 times with their ConferMED colleagues.

"If I send out for something I didn't know how to handle before, and I get my eConsult back with next steps and tests, I already know the next steps for the next patient I see with that condition," says Dr. Gerson. "I'm better able to treat them and care for them." The partnership has been a win-win for patients and providers, and is another innovative way Americares is improving outcomes for our community.

Dr. Gerson connected with a ConferMED specialist about her diabetic patient, and within 48 hours she knew the next steps for him in the workup of suspected hemochromatosis. This condition can cause iron deposits in organs, and when that iron is deposited in the pancreas it can cause diabetes. He began treatment quickly, having experienced the highest quality of care.



Patient Ruben doesn't need a specialist, but if he does, Dr. Gerson will have a specialty consult as close as her computer.

### Fred Weisman AmeriCares Free Clinic

115 Highland Avenue  
Bridgeport, CT 06604  
203.333.9175

### Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free Clinic

76 West Street  
Danbury, CT 06810  
203.748.6188

### Bob Macauley AmeriCares Free Clinic

98 South Main Street  
Norwalk, CT 06854  
203.899.2493

### Americares Free Clinic of Stamford

401 Shippan Avenue  
Stamford, CT 06902  
203.658.9507

## A Patient's Story: Elias

### Little is certain in Elias's daily life:

He has an hourly, seasonal job working construction, and on any given day he could be planting trees, mixing cement, moving stone or, especially in winter, not working at all. There might be time to eat during the day — or not. And food must be inexpensive, so meals are usually from a can or restaurant.

Elias does have one sure thing: quality health care from Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free Clinic of Danbury. Four years ago, when Elias was experiencing stomach pain and headaches, a friend told him about the clinic. Clinic staff diagnosed his gastritis and found he also had high cholesterol and blood pressure and provided him with medicine and a nutritionist to help make healthy food choices. Having medicine for his high blood pressure is a relief for Elias. "There are days I forget, and I see the difference," he says. "When I don't take it, I work

more out of breath, and when I take it, I work more calmly."

Americares Free Clinic Nutritionist and Patient Care Coordinator Ramon Correia helps Elias choose low-salt options at the grocery store. "Today, because the goal was low-sodium canned foods, I asked him to take pictures when of what he buys," says Correia. Then, Correia can suggest ways to lower the salt content — by rinsing canned vegetables, for example. "With the health coach strategy, the patient is in charge," says Correia. "We're giving the patient knowledge." Correia knows that prevention is key to a lifetime of good health and works closely with clinic patients who, like Elias, live complex, uncertain lives. The clinic also provided grocery store cash cards when Elias had no work last winter; the cards were donated by Boehringer Ingelheim and 4-CT, a statewide nonprofit.



Most of Elias's family live in Guatemala; he is here with one of his four children, a son. Elias appreciates the closeness of the clinic staff, who treat him with such warmth and care — like a family, he says. "They treat you with a lot of love," he says. "They advocate for you. It's a happiness. It feels like finding a relative by talking to them and having their help. It's hard to find people like that. But here in this clinic, the staff is excellent."