

VOLUNTEERS

TFC has many opportunities for clinical and lay-volunteers: from doctors, nurses, counselors, and nutritionists; to those who work in the pharmacy, reception, help in the garden, or assist staff with patient outreach —and more!

Email volunteer@thefreeclinics.org to learn more and get started.

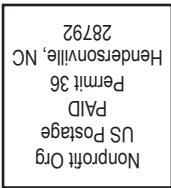
THANK YOU to our Annual Sponsors to date!

SPONSORS



Summer 2021
Community Impact Focus:
COVID-19: One Year Later

Return Service Requested



A Message from Our Executive Director: Judith Long



The COVID-19 Pandemic transformed our lives over the past year, and that transformation is certainly true of life at The Free Clinics.

In the initial weeks, we moved rapidly to change almost everything about our systems: extending eligibility for all patients until 30 June; receiving permission from our various pharmacy suppliers to extend prescriptions to 90 day fills; instituting curbside pick-up of medications; and adding telehealth dimensions to our care, which necessitated a campaign to ensure that our very economically disenfranchised patients could find wifi hotspots so that they could participate in those telehealth options.

Everything was unknown. 65% of our volunteers opted for a “pandemic sabbatical.” Yet, more new patients were showing up every day. Typically, TFC welcomes 50 patients per month. During the peak moments, we were welcoming 95-115 new patients per month, **double** our usual volume. We cancelled every event, so worried about sufficient funding. And of course, we experienced the random shortages of necessary items—toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and critical PPE (personal protective equipment). There were days and moments that felt keeping our doors open was an insurmountable challenge.

But our community does what it does best. We came together, as board and staff and remaining volunteers, as donors and supporters, as community partners, and we made it happen. TFC proudly **remained open every day**, honoring our mission of “changing lives together, with health and hope.”

It is my honor and blessing to lead The Free Clinics—and never more so than during this year. I find myself overwhelmed by gratitude for you all and what you allowed us to do during this incredibly challenging time. Thank you!

828.697.8422

info@thefreeclinics.org

Responding and Adapting to New Needs

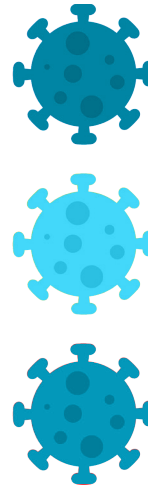
We knew that more people than ever would be in need of our services due to COVID-related losses of jobs, income, and insurance—but it wasn't until we looked at the numbers that we realized just how drastic the change was. For the past several years, The Free Clinics has seen around 50 new patients every month. But during the height of the pandemic, we were seeing an average of 84 new patients every month - **68% more than usual!**

On the other hand, when we had to transition many of our services to telehealth, we were afraid that our existing clients might not be able to adapt to the "new normal". To the contrary, the number of attendees to our weekly virtual Bridges to Health group medical visits (while a little lower) stabilized at a level much closer to previous years' rates than we anticipated. Though "Zoom fatigue" set in during the fall, now that we have resumed hybrid in-person meetings we are seeing attendance numbers continue to rise back toward pre-pandemic levels - a true testament to our clients' resilience and commitment to their own health.

COVID Impact on New Patients per Month



A few months into the pandemic we started to see rising numbers of patients each month as individuals sought care after changes in their employment/insurance status. With the rollout of the vaccine and businesses reopening, our new patient numbers are starting to return toward normal levels.



Making Telehealth Accessible

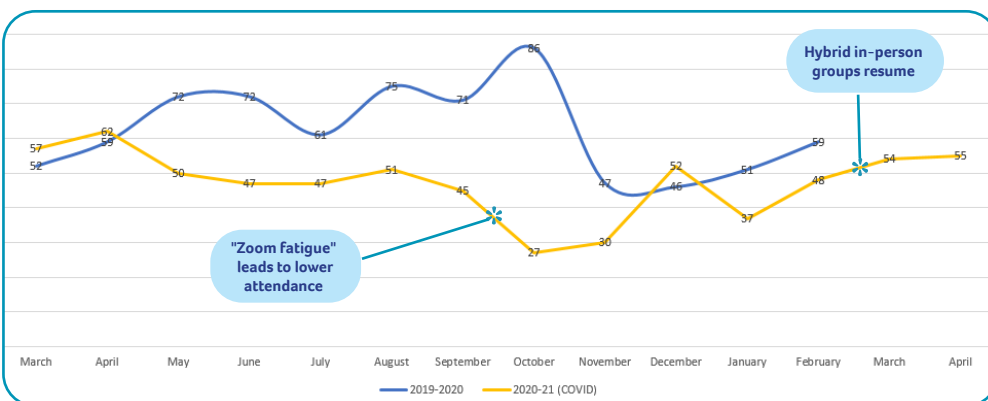
One of the unique challenges of transitioning our services to telehealth was that many of our clients do not have reliable access to the high-speed internet needed to support video meetings.

TFC led a public service campaign to identify new partners who provide free WiFi, so that our patients could visit convenient locations around town to access their online appointments during the stay-at-home orders.

In addition to adding a guest network at TFC, other area partners in this initiative included

- Conserving Carolina
- Downtown Hendersonville
- Harris Teeter
- Hendersonville Community Co-Op
- Hendersonville Library
- Lowe's
- McDonald's

Bridges to Health (BTH) Group Attendance



When our BTH meetings went virtual, many of our clients continued to attend on a regular basis, with only a 26% decrease on average compared to the prior year. Now that we have resumed in-person meetings, even more are coming back.

Talking with Jim Hall, PhD - Mental Health Specialist for Bridges to Health

What were the positives of moving to telehealth?

The *beauty*, the strongest upside in my mind, was that we had a way to continue to provide care! So, we didn't just close the doors and those people that we serve be left dangling. That was very powerful and very welcome, and worth all the investment. I'm hoping that now (*that in-person meetings have resumed*) we can go hybrid where primarily

people come face to face, but in a last-resort case somebody could Zoom in if they needed to—for childcare, transportation issues, whatever might interfere that day of the Bridges session—and they could still get the care that they need.

Were there any negatives to virtual care?

The primary downside is the connection just isn't the same. You don't have the proximity, you don't have the non-verbal kind of connection that we get in our human interactions from just being **present**. As a therapist, I have learned over a long period of time just how powerful that level of communication and connection is for us as human beings. The virtual meeting just doesn't give you the same sense of connection, the same means of providing that connection—that **presence** that is so powerful. So that has been a loss. But we use it as best we can.



Jim Hall is a member of the Bridges to Health care team, which also includes a provider, nurse case manager, clinical pharmacist, occupational therapist, and patient health advocate.