Clinic meets growing demand

The City on a Hill Health Clinic has been able to see patients through most of the spring and summer, staying open as an essential service, by implementing strict health protocols and new technology, to the point that it treated more patients this spring than the same period last year.

And now the Clinic is preparing for a rush of new patients left without jobs and insurance if extra unemployment funds expire.

The COVID-19 crisis has also put a spotlight on community needs.

“The pandemic has created a time, for me, as leader of a ministry and nonprofit, to reflect on the individuals who come to the clinic for not only healthcare, but for healing and hope,” said Clinic Director Christine Plummer. “It has been obvious to us in the nonprofit world for decades, the overwhelming disparities many of our clients encounter when it comes to healthcare, education, housing, politics, wealth, employment, and the criminal justice system.”

Nonprofit leaders and clients have been talking about these disparities for years, she pointed out. Now, as the world has paused, she hopes the community can work to address those disparities and barriers that keep some people from being successful.

Toward that end, clinic leaders and staff are seeking to learn how to better support those who are disadvantaged.

“I pray that we remain open and willing to not only listen, but also to reflect on our own biases and prejudices that keep us from loving each other as brothers and sisters in Christ,” Christine said.

At the same time, the Clinic is serving as the “hands of Christ” for growing numbers.

During the spring and early summer, while carefully controlling contact, the Clinic treated 540 patients. It added tele-health options for counseling, medical consults, and community health worker assistance. And it was able to distribute hundreds of boxes of fresh produce through a USDA grant to local growers.

Now, expecting to see increasing numbers of people without insurance, the Clinic is looking for more medical professional volunteers, as well as for financial support for mental health services to aid people who suffered stress and isolation during the pandemic.

COAH adapts to continue to serve

“We’re adapting, and it’s a continuous process.” That’s Director Gary Ellens’ summary of life at City on a Hill during the COVID-19 crisis.

“Adapting” means ministry is underway — if in a somewhat new fashion. That “fashion” includes mask wearing in all public spaces and a locked front door to ensure that only ministry partner employees or guests are in the building.

More and more ministry partners are working on site, Gary said, but added, “I would not say we’re back to our normal pace of activity.”

That said, the caring, collaborative atmosphere is back to normal.

“When I see partners here, they’re glad to have a place to be back to, and they’re very interested in what’s happening at City on a Hill. They frequently ask how the other partners are doing.

“There’s definitely a feeling of, ‘Are we doing OK, are people doing OK?’ It once again brings out that feeling of family that people have at City on a Hill, wondering what’s happening with some of the other brother and sister ministries.”

The future remains an unknown. Masks and doors locked for the foreseeable future, Gary noted. “We’re attempting to adapt to meet new circumstances as they come up.

“But we are here, and we’re vibrant. In many ways it’s business as usual. We’re continuing to provide low-cost space for ministries. For many of them, what they do has not changed. The ministries that are here are doing great work.”
ATLAS: New ways “to be the hands and heart of Jesus”

As community needs increased through the spring and summer, ATLAS staff found new ways to serve clients, even when they couldn’t meet in their offices. Outside meetings were held at Lawrence Park and at the Café’s outside patio.

The biggest need ATLAS is seeing during the COVID crisis is families needing food. ATLAS was able to help more than 120 families. It also was able to provide housing for two homeless individuals with the help of church partners.

And staff has continued to provide support for clients who are isolated, explained ATLAS Executive Director Terri Caldwell.

ATLAS also participated in a COVID Cash Assistance project with Movement West Michigan, with 10 families getting $500 grants from that fund.

Finally, in a staffing transition, ATLAS was able to welcome a new life skills coach, Jordan Cross. Jordan has a bachelor’s degree in social work and is working on a masters of counseling from Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. “We are so excited to have her joining our team!” Terri said.

ATLAS is making major impact in people’s lives. One example: A woman we’ll call Cindy is an ATLAS client who was living in her van before COVID. Then she suffered a stroke. After she was released from the hospital, she reached out to ATLAS. Staff found temporary housing, then in early July was able to find her permanent housing and help her file for disability support. Cindy is so grateful for the life-changing help. “I don’t know where I would be without you guys,” she said.

But even as society hopes to move on from the pandemic, the ATLAS staff expects an influx of calls when special unemployment benefits end and the hold on evictions and utility shut-offs ends.

“A few of our church partners have donated funds to help keep families in their homes and electricity on,” Terri said. “We also received a grant to help with this, but I know it still won’t be enough to help everyone who reaches out to us.

“As needs are greater than ever, we at ATLAS have the opportunity to minister to so many in our community who are struggling to get by,” she said.

“What a blessing it is to be the hands and heart of Jesus in such practical and needed ways during a time like this.”

As the Café opens: Behind our masks, we’re smiling.

The City on a Hill Café has gradually re-opened to provide a “safe place” for people to begin going out.

The Café offers connections for a community of friends, older people, and ministry partners, Director Megan Behler explained. As the Café re-opened in June and July, those people came for coffee, muffins, cookies, and friendship.

“The Tuesday and Wednesday crowd are people that need us, that need to get out and feel community,” she said. “Their need for community, for connection, is something that is driving them here.”

The Café staff works hard to provide a clean and safe space for those guests. “It’s a place where they’re feeling comfortable to explore being out in a restaurant or a public setting,” Megan explained.

“We’re able to teach people to feel comfortable going out — teach them how do you go out in public, starting with a place where they feel safe and have spent a lot of time.”

The Café also has been able to serve ministry partners who are returning to work in the building.

COAH Director Gary Ellens noted the activity level the Café brings to the building on the days it is open. “I think it underscores the significance of the Café in terms of what happens here with our partners.”

The Café re-opened slowly with a limited menu and to be sure demand warranted the cost, but also to be sure to provide that safe environment. Staff hope to open on Thursdays in August, and, once school opening is clear, perhaps open on Mondays in September.

The Café staff is also eager to connect again with the volunteers who are so important to the Café atmosphere — and many volunteers are eager to return.

“People coming in makes or breaks our day!”

The Café is working hard to continue to be a place of community even with safety precautions in place, to be a place where the Holy Spirit moves, Megan explained. “That’s our prayer, that we hold onto that which we are.”

“We pride ourselves on providing a clean place, following the guidelines that have been given, but still being a smiling, friendly place. Behind our masks, we’re smiling.

“And people coming in makes or breaks our day. If it’s slow, we’re sad, a little disappointed, because that’s the whole reason we’re here, to see those people in the community that have been a part of us for 13-plus years.”