

Houston Chronicle

November 25, 2004

Church a clearinghouse for health and social services; Epiphany offers free screenings, seeks financial help, volunteers

By Maurice Bobb, Houston Chronicle Correspondent

With the number of people without health insurance rising sharply, it's become increasingly important for agencies to provide services to those in need.

The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany is answering that call with its outreach program, Epiphany Community Health Outreach Services (ECHOS).

At 9610 Gessner, the nonprofit ministry arranges free medical screenings and helps members of the Sharpstown community access available health and social service systems.

"We opened in this area in 1998 and the initial concept was that it would act as kind of a clearinghouse for health and social services," said executive director Carolyn Pincheck.

"Initially, we were going to provide onsite health services and have a nurse here full time, but the need has changed so much that our focus for the last four years has been to become a selling point for community resources.

"We provide the administrative support, the building, the volunteers, the processing application assistance and appointment assistance for community agencies."

Provider help

Each month, a number of ECHOS community service partners provide health and social services on the ECHOS campus.

These providers include Shalom Zone, which provides health examinations; the Houston Area Women's Center, which provides education and group counseling for victims of domestic violence; and InVision, which offers eye exams and glasses at low cost.

"We have mammograms four times a year," Pincheck said. "We also have a vision station so that people can come get their low cost or free glasses. Usually we can help them get glasses for about \$ 35."

The screenings and referrals are directed to children and adults regardless of financial resources or immigration status.

“There are a lot of people here illegally, but have been here for years,” Pincheck said.

“By them not having citizenship or legal reason to be here, there’s no way for them to get assistance. So we provide assistance for them.

“Everything is done in a Christian-type atmosphere where we’re non-discriminatory,” Pincheck added.

“Anybody can walk in the door. We don’t ask any questions and we don’t care where you’re from.”

Additional resources

ECHOS staff and volunteers are available Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday to assist with Gold Card, Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) applications and referrals for other services.

“A lot of the people that we serve are people that have not qualified for Medicaid or CHIP. Right now, we’re doing 500 to 800 applications a month for Medicaid, CHIP or Gold Card.”

Best of all, all of the services are free.

“We only deal with nonprofits, so all of our services are free,” Pincheck said.

“So what we’ve provided is a place where people can come and get services when they can’t afford the private sector.

The ministry is particularly appropriated for the neighborhood in which it serves.

“I lived here for 25 years and back then, it was all Caucasian middle class to upper middle class demographics and everybody had health insurance,” Pincheck said. “Now there are a lot more mixed cultures with much more lower income levels. We saw kids not getting services and that’s what got everyone’s attention.

“There were food give outs and everything, but there were no medical services being provided. So we just saw a huge need for medical and health services and formed ECHOS.”

Educational services

ECHOS also offers ESL and GED classes and has a children’s literacy program as well.

“We sponsor a book drive so that every child that comes in here walks out with a book that’s theirs to keep,” Pincheck said.

Currently, ECHOS sees about 1,700 clients a month.

With that kind of demand, the organization is in desperate need for more volunteers.

“The church acts as a primary sponsor for us so most of our volunteers come from the church,” Pincheck said. “Right now, we have 30 active volunteers, but like all nonprofit organizations we need help – whether it be monetary or voluntary, or both.”

ECHOS provides a monthly service calendar that may be forwarded to any organization, church or school by calling the office during business hours at 713-270-0369.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

What: Epiphany Community Health Outreach Services (ECHOS)

When: Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Where: 9610 S. Gessner

Services: Medical screenings, vision screenings on Thursdays at 1:30 p.m., ESL and GED classes.

Cost: All services are free.

For more information, call 713-270-0369.

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