

FEATURE

NATIONAL SCHOOL NURSE'S WEEK

Malvern School-Based Site Employees Happy to Serve Growing Patient Population

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATE OLSON

After two years, word has spread about Healthy Connections school-based clinic in Malvern. The clinic has seen a drastic increase in both student and adult patients since its opening.

"We have had tremendous patient growth over the past two years," Healthy Connections nurse practitioner Melanie Newman said. "We are the only clinic in town that takes adult Medicaid, so we see a lot of those patients. Word has also spread around the school with parents about our school-based clinic. They have figured out it is easy for their kids to get care, and they don't have to come and get them out of school."

Like any other federally qualified health center, the site is open to anyone. However, being located on Malvern School District property makes it very student-friendly.

The building is very close to the high school and those students can walk by themselves to the clinic if they need medical attention. Students that attend schools further away can be driven by a district staff member with written permission from parents.

"It's really amazing," Healthy Connections nurse Andrea Pilcher said. "This is the first clinic I have heard that's like that where we are partnered with the school and if a kid is sick or

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- *Melanie Newman*

has some questions, they can check out of class and come over and see us. We try to get them in and out as quick as possible. If they can go back to school, they won't miss too much class."

Newman has seen parents, who have different primary care doctors, use the clinic when they can't leave work. District staff will also pick up prescriptions for parents with the signed consent form. Any Malvern student can visit the clinic. Pilcher said many times the students see a school nurse at their campus first and then are referred to the clinic.

"The kids are what drew me to the health center in Malvern because it was school-based," Newman said. "When you have a parent that calls and says, 'I can't get my child into the primary care clinic. They are at

school, and I am at work. What do I do?' We get them in here and take care of them, and their parents are so appreciative. That is my favorite part."

Newman said many families have switched to make the clinic their primary care. Others just use the service on occasion or when they need a wellness check or sports physical.

Pilcher said some families' insurance isn't accepted but at like all FQHCs a sliding-fee scale is used, so the care is still affordable.

"We don't turn anyone away," Newman said.

About 20 percent of Malvern's population of 10,000 is below the poverty line. There are many adults who need the services the FQHC provides.

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“I was surprised to come to Malvern and see so many providers in town and still have such a large patient population,” Newman said. “I think it is because of the underprivileged population. There is a real need here, and it is nice to be able to help so many people. When you are working in this kind of setting where there are a lot of under-insured and un-insured, you have to have a heart for it. You have to want to do it.”

Pilcher has been a nurse for eight years. Soon, she will earn her registered nurse degree. Growing up in Bismarck, Arkansas, she was inspired by her mother who was a certified nurse’s assistant for the Arkansas Health Department in Arkadelphia.

“I just always knew I wanted to be a nurse,” Pilcher said. “It was either a nurse or a veterinarian. There are some animals that just creep me out, but I am a helping person. That’s what I love to do, and it really opens my eyes that there are so many people that need care. It doesn’t matter what happens in your day-to-day lives, you are sick. I am going to help you feel better and not judge you on your past. I am here to help you out.”

The mother of two young children, Pilcher enjoys the variety of patients the site provides but it’s the students that brighten her day most.

“That really hits home,” she said. “I have two kids, and one who is in school – she’s six. You know there are kids out there that don’t get the health care they need. Knowing I am in this clinic and can make a difference is awesome.

“I love kids, and I love working with kids. Sometimes I have to be the bad guy and give them shots, but I try to make them happy. I give them



a toy or a book or something. Working with adults and children is very different. You have to change your mentality.”

Newman has a heart for FQHCs beginning her career at First Choice HealthCare in Corning. The Cabot native and Arkansas State alumnae began at First Choice upon graduation and practiced there for 15 years. When her husband was transferred to Hot Springs she was drawn to Healthy Connections.

“[Healthy Connections] is a great organization,” Newman said. “One thing I like about it is, it is spread out. We are serving a lot of different access points. They have not only fulfilled

my needs as a nurse practitioner, but they are always thinking about the patient. The patient is always first.”

The school-based site was in particular interest to Newman, who is also a mom.

“I knew I wanted to be at that clinic,” she said. “It is so great to work with kids.”

As School Nurse Week is celebrated May 6-12, Newman and Pilcher feel blessed to work with Malvern students and so many parents and community members are glad to have them.

“I think our population will continue to grow,” Newman said. “The more kids we treat, the more are coming here.”