

Haitians, Americans hope new clinic will provide jobs

PETITE RIVIERE DE NIPPES, Haiti - Hundreds of people in this Haitian coastal town marched around deep potholes, over broken bridges and past small concrete huts, rusted truck beds, women washing clothes in streams and playing with children.

Starting at St. Antoine Church in the town's center, they followed a teenage boy carrying a cross. When they reached the edge of the town, they started up a steep driveway to the top, where they crowded onto the porch of the new Visitation Clinic, with its views of the lush mountains on one side and the shimmering Caribbean on the other.

After Bishop Alix Verrier of Les Cayes, Haiti, blessed and dedicated the building, the people filled the new clinic to get their first, eager glimpse of the building they're counting on to improve their lives in many ways.

"There are a lot of people who are sick and there's not a hospital in the area, and a lot of people are dying," said Father Valery Rebecca, pastor of St. Antoine. The clinic also will be a source of much-needed jobs for the parishioners, he said.

Dr. Tom Grabenstein said he is confident the clinic - and later a hospital - will change Petite Riviere in many ways. Grabenstein is president of the board of the Visitation Hospital Foundation, a nonprofit organization that grew out of the Parish Twinning Program, which links U.S. parishes and Christian congregations with Haitian parishes and programs to offer assistance.

"There are two good Catholic schools there, but when (students) graduate, there is nothing for them to do ... but move to Port-au-Prince," the Haitian capital, said Grabenstein, who has made at least 35 trips to Haiti, mostly as part of medical missions with fellow parishioners from Immaculate Conception Church in Clarksville, Tenn.

At times, as many as 60 people were working on the construction of the clinic,

Grabenstein said, and by next year, the clinic will have about 20 employees.

Father Edwidge Carre, a native of Haiti and pastor of Holy Name Church in Nashville, said the clinic and hospital also will attract other businesses to the town.

“Once you have a clinic here, automatically you will have people coming here to open businesses,” said Father Carre, who traveled to Haiti in January for the clinic dedication. “They know if something happens to them there will be a doctor here.”

Access to health care is difficult in Haiti where 30 hospitals serve more than 8 million people.

People from all over the area will come to the clinic, said Dr. Rony Jean-Francois, clinic medical director. Jean-Francois will lead a staff comprised of another doctor, three nurses, a pharmacist, a lab technician and the clinic administrator. All but one of them will be Haitians.

Jean-Francois already is planning to use the clinic to house training programs for medical staff. Plans also call for the clinic to be the location of community-based outreach programs such as nutrition education, a food bank and an agricultural program.

Alan Dooley, the architect who donated his services to design the clinic, created it with sustainability in mind. Because electrical service in Haiti is often unreliable, Dooley said, the clinic will receive all its power from 38 solar panels attached to the roof, which also holds a solar water heater. Rainwater from the roof will be collected, filtered and pumped to the clinic’s water tower.

All the appliances selected for the clinic are low-energy users, and the clinic will use low-flow toilets, all to reduce the use of power and water as much as possible, Dooley said.

To help keep the clinic cool, the central corridor was designed with a tall ceiling lined at the top with windows, “which was a common way to cool basilicas,” Dooley said.

The roof has deep overhangs to shade the walls, Dooley added.

Even the landscaping was designed with sustainability in mind: Frances and Mike Sosadeeter of Sarasota, Fla., who designed the landscaping, used as many native and edible plants as possible, and used palm trees to help shade the clinic, Dooley said.