

Permanent health-care facility helps immigrants

With the stroke of a pen, uninsured east Baltimore immigrants gained the promise of a permanent health care facility with broader medical services, five days a week.

The signing of a consortium agreement Dec. 4 signifies Catholic Charities is teaming with two Baltimore-area Catholic hospitals, St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson and St. Agnes Hospital, Baltimore, as well as The Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, to treat uninsured immigrants.

Although St. Joseph has been treating approximately 2,000 Latino immigrants annually in front of Catholic Charities' Hispanic Apostolate in Fells Point through its mobile St. Clare Medical Outreach, the new stationary facility will offer broader medical services.

Though not joining the consortium, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, will provide pediatric dental care at the Hispanic Apostolate once the \$1.5 million renovations to the second floor are complete and the health center is operational – which is expected by March, said Harold A. Smith, executive director of Catholic Charities.

The Health Services Center will have five exam rooms, two dental chairs, an eye-care room and comfortable waiting and reception rooms. The number of patients is expected to double, and the center should reduce the use of emergency rooms for non-emergencies.

St. Joseph will provide primary care for adults, Johns Hopkins will offer pediatric care, and St. Agnes will give obstetrical and gynecological care.

"We are proud to be able to expand our care to the community surrounding the Hispanic Apostolate," said John K. Tolmie, president and CEO of St. Joseph Medical Center. "The fixed site and expanded hours will offer the community greater access, communication, follow-up treatment and care with dignity in a safe environment."

The St. Clare coach will continue to offer health-care services in front of the

Franciscan Center in lower Charles Village – a regular stop on the mobile clinic’s travels – and now will be freed up to travel to other areas of the city, Mr. Tolmie said.

“In Maryland, Hispanic patients are less likely to be insured,” said Dr. Raymond Cox, chair of obstetrics and gynecology at St. Agnes. “This can delay entry into care, especially during pregnancy.”

Steve Thompson, senior vice president for Johns Hopkins Medicine, added that this “health initiative is a continuation of our long-standing support for the ever-changing east Baltimore community.”

A 2005 study on Hispanic access to health care was the impetus for the center, Mr. Smith said.

“It cited lack of health insurance, funds to pay for treatment and medications, transportation and the inability to communicate as factors that discourage immigrant Hispanics from seeking health care,” he said. “In response to this report, the consortium participants began exploring a way to address these unmet needs.”

Immigrants treated at the new center will be asked to pay \$10 per visit to help offset operating costs, but Mr. Smith added that no one will be turned away if they can’t afford the fee.

Like the St. Clare mobile unit, the new health center will not be a walk-in clinic. Patrons must make an appointment for care.

“We really are excited about the potential of outreach,” said Bonnie Phipps, president and CEO of St. Agnes HealthCare. “We hope this is only phase one.”