

**Onondaga Citizens League**  
**2007 Study: Health Inequalities in Onondaga County**

**Public Session #5:**

**Barriers to Healthcare**

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

3:30 to 5:00 p.m.

Home Aides of CNY

723 James Street, Syracuse, NY

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**Guest:**

**Sister James Peter**, Poverello Clinic, Northside Franciscan Ministries

Sister James Peter is a member of the Franciscan Order, and is a part of the Franciscan Collective Ministry, founded in the 1990s by friars and sisters of her order, based at Assumption Parish. The Ministry is made up of the Poverello Clinic, a legal clinic, a food pantry, and Franciscan Place, a spot in Carousel Mall where Mass is celebrated on a regular basis.

Sister Dolly, Father Justin and Father Tim Mulligan, now at Syracuse University, started the ministry, and moved into a building on North Salina Street, after cleaning, painting and renovating it. Two of the friars went to the Regional Market each Saturday and passed out cotton candy. They asked people the question, "What can we do to help the northside community?" The answers centered around three areas: food supply, medical care and legal resources.

A food pantry was started, as well as a legal clinic on Tuesdays and Thursdays, both which continue to this day.

The Poverello Clinic was also formed in March 2000, and today is staffed by Sister James Peter, Sister Dolly and Dr. Suzanne LaManna, a former nun with the Sisters of St. Francis order. It all began with a few medical supplies and prescription samples. The first patient, "John," came in with an earache. He thanked the staff and mentioned the clinic to others, and now they see patients from as far away as Utica, Ithaca and Watertown. Sister Dolly visits parishes across upstate New York fundraising for the clinic.

Physicians volunteer for two hour shifts in the late afternoon/early evening on Monday and Wednesday, and an 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. time slot has been added. During a two-hour period, 15 would be a low number of clients, 20-25 would be considered average and the highest number seen during that time period was 37.

Medications are donated by physicians and drug company representatives. The Dames and Knights of Malta, a Catholic organization, purchases generic drugs for the clinic. The clinic does not distribute any kind of narcotics or barbiturates or sleep aids. They are able to distribute anti-depressant drugs when available; a psychiatrist does volunteer with the clinic on a regular basis.

Currently, 14 medical doctors, three specialists, 26 nurses, a podiatrist, two chiropractors, two dentists volunteer at the clinic. Dr. Michael Roth provides free exams and glasses on a monthly basis. There are also two social workers/counselors available to see clients. According to Sister James Peter, most of the clients being treated have chronic diseases, with diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and hypertension being the most prevalent.

The clinic's medical doctors see about 1,640 patients annually. Lab Alliance processes blood for the clinic at Medicaid re-imburement rates. Some patients are able to pay for blood work, and do. Sister James Peter recalled a patient who once said he would come back with money to cover the services he received when he found a job. A year later, he came back with \$50 and gave it to Sister Dolly. That was, said Sister James Peter, one of the more "rewarding" aspects of the ministry.

What has kept the patients seen by the clinic from getting care? Sister James Peter pointed to several reasons: Most have no insurance coverage, and they lack the resources and transportation to keep appointments. They lack stability and self-esteem within themselves, and often come from an environment where the state helps. Many are young and pregnant with alcohol and drug addictions.

Sister James Peter said that the vast majority of their clients are members of the "working poor," those who make too much money for Medicaid, but not enough money to purchase health insurance. They see a limited number of "street people." While they see a small amount of children, Poverello's primary clients are 30 to 50 years old. Thirty-five to forty percent of clients do work at regular jobs, but those are typically minimum wage situations. About five percent of those the clinic sees are not here legally, and those are mostly Hispanic.

The clinic refers people to various resources, such as Women's Health Outreach, Southwest Community Health Center and city and county agencies, and the VA Hospital for veterans. They are now able to track patients better and do follow up since they received a grant to renovate the bottom of Assumption School's basement.

Referrals to physicians are difficult, because most clients they do not have insurance and most cannot afford or commit to an installment payment plan for healthcare. Sister tries to get people to re-apply to Medicaid, in the hope they will qualify.

The continuity of care, says Sister, is very frustrating at times. In response to a question about demographic shifting over the last seven years, since the clinic was founded, she reports that there hasn't been many changes in the age range or ethnicity of their clients, though there has been a steady growth in the number of people seen: 600 in years one to four of the clinic's existence, but 1400 to 1600 in years four to seven. Most are poor Whites and African-Americans, and some Native Americans; Sister has seen the number of Asian patients decrease since the clinic opened. There is no other clinic like Poverello here in Syracuse; the closest is in Rochester.

Betty DeFazio, the 2007 Study Co-Chairperson, asked Sister James Peter if she had any recommendations for policymakers. Sister said that changes to Medicare/Medicaid could help,

such as lowering the income ranges so more people qualify, and quicker processing of Medicaid applications, especially for emergency medical care. She also pointed to the growing problem of physicians not taking patients who use public health insurance; they should be required to see a certain number of Medicaid and uninsured patients. Discussion began among attendees about the fact that the number of Medicaid providers has declined.

Betty DeFazio then asked Sister James Peter what she would tell Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton if she had the opportunity. Sister answered, "Our healthcare system is insufficient. Clientele are not covered, especially for psychiatric care." She added that Poverello probably saves the healthcare system much money each year, but she fears people are dying in our community because they do not have the financial resources to obtain good care.

When asked if the clinic sees many instances of domestic violence, Sister said yes, and she is hopeful because the clinic has formed a Women's Group that meets on Thursdays, and women have begun to build trust and talk about their relationships and problems.