



Registered nurse Mary Allen Berens stands ready to help at the WellCare Foundation clinic in the Gilbert Boys & Girls Club. WellCare is a non-profit that provides free, integrated health care to those qualified. NICK OZA/THE REPUBLIC

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The WellCare Foundation within the Gilbert Boys & Girls Club provides free, integrated health care for single working mothers and fathers and children to age 18 in need. The Gilbert clinic opened in March 2008 and has cared for more than 200 patients, addressing the needs of the whole patient in body, mind and spirit.

Registered nurse Mary Allen Berens is among those who provide care to single parents and their children at the WellCare Foundation clinic at the Gilbert Boys & Girls Club.

WellCare providing free care to single parents, kids

By Srianthi Perera
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Regina Cook falls through the cracks of health insurance.

The single mother of two sons works as a nurse at a senior living center but can't afford the monthly \$600 premiums for health insurance through her employer. Her income doesn't qualify her for state medical assistance.

Luckily for her, when her son had pink eye Cook was told about the WellCare Foundation clinic within the Gilbert Boys & Girls Club.

It's a well-kept secret in Gilbert, a secret that registered nurse Marge Ebeling is ready to divulge.

Ebeling is the founder of the WellCare Foundation, a Phoenix-based non-profit that provides free, integrated health care for single working mothers and fathers and children to age 18 in need. It opened a decade ago with an office and clinic in north central Phoenix and also has clinics at Tempe Boys & Girls Club and in central Phoenix. The Gilbert clinic was opened in March 2008 and has since cared for more than 200 patients. It sees about eight patients from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Thursdays.

The all-encompassing care addresses

the needs of the whole patient in body, mind and spirit.

"If you come in with a backache, we'd definitely address the backache, but the assessment will check everything that's been going on. So you may leave with an appointment to see a gynecologist because you may not have had a well-woman check for years or a dental visit," Ebeling said. "Moms backburner their health. They put the kids first."

The clinic is designed and decorated in pastel shades with youthful touches to put children at ease. Soft music and aromatherapy help create a relaxed atmosphere for adults.

"The nurse was nice and understanding and listened to what my kids had to say," Cook said. "You are not rushed in and rushed out. They took care over you. It's such a blessing for any single parent to have, in this economy."

According to Ebeling, the 2006 census found 175,000 single working moms without health insurance in Maricopa County. In the current economy, she estimates the number to be more than 200,000. The foundation saw an increase in patients of 23 percent in the first quarter of the year.

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Also, the care is free.

"That's the only thing that's hard for a mom to believe, that it's free. They'll say, 'What would that cost?' and we'd say, 'Nothing.' We also give them vitamins and minerals if they need them and if their diet is poor," Ebeling said. "A lot of the time, they are in tears because they can't believe that this quality of care is provided to them for free."

The clinics are possible because the doctors and specialists donate their services. WellCare has 100 medical practitioners for acupuncture, ophthalmology, dermatology, gynecology, massage therapy, counseling, osteopathic medicine, pediatrics and radiology.

The non-profit runs with three nurses, who perform the initial 45-minute health assessment. Acute and chronic sicknesses are treated, but not emergency care, although WellCare has a partnership with NextCare Urgent Care, as well.

"Arizona is among the lowest in the nation for health care for these families. So we're trying to make a difference," Ebeling said.

WellCare Foundation clinics

What: Integrated health care to qualifying single working mothers/fathers and their children.

When: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Thursdays in Gilbert by appointment.

Where: Within the Gilbert Boys & Girls Club, 44 N. Oak St., Gilbert.

Other locations: Main office at 55 E. Lexington Ave., Phoenix; WellCare Clinic at The Fresh Start Women's Resource Center, 1130 E. McDowell Road; and at the Tempe Boys & Girls Club 715 W. Fifth St., Tempe.

Cost: All health care is free.

Details: 602-263-7619, wellcarefoundation.org.

To become a patient

» You must be single, working or enrolled full time in school and unable to afford health insurance or needed health care.

» You must not be reliant on state assistance.

» You may pre-qualify over the phone or submit the eligibility form on the Web site to receive an appointment.

» The initial health assessment is 45 minutes.

» Doctor appointments will be made according to needs.