

Health Center #9 to be Charging Uninsured for Services

By **TORRI GRICE**
Editorial Intern



The city's Health Center #9, 131 East Cheltenham Avenue, which serves the Northwest Philadelphia area, will soon begin charging all uninsured patients for services. The new sliding-scale fees, which will range from \$5 to \$20 a visit, are being implemented at all of the city's eight health centers. Without the fees – which represent the first time the city has ever charged for health care at its centers – city officials said they might have had to shut down some centers because of the city's budget crisis.

"We want people to know that this isn't a free clinic," said Patricia Nesmith, director of Health Center #9. "We have good doctors here... (but) ultimately someone's paying," she said. Each month, the Germantown center sees between 3,000 and 4,000 patients, according to Health Department officials.

The new fees were to take effect in mid-November, but implementation has been delayed by logistical problems as the city lines up vendors that sell the machines that will be used to collect patient fees, said Jeff Moran, Health Department spokesman. He said officials expected the kinks to be worked out soon.

Nesmith noted that 48 percent of the center's patients actually have health insurance, but don't always present it. "We hope that the fees will encourage everyone to use their insurance if they have it," she said.

Philadelphia is one of the few cities in the

country that has offered free health care to the poor at city-run health centers. But with the city's growing budget problems, officials feared that several health centers would have to be closed. The new fee system is an alternative to closure.

In his budget address, Health Commissioner Dr. Donald F. Schwarz emphasized that fees at the centers, which are aimed at preserving quality service, were discussed at a series of public meetings where citizens had an opportunity to see the alternatives and express their views.

Patients at Health Center #9 who were interviewed in recent weeks said they understood the need for the new fees. Many

expressed praise for the center's professional staff, which includes three pediatricians, six family medicine doctors, one podiatrist, two dentists, one priority doctor, two nurse practitioners, and one gynecologist.

"I've been a patient for six years and Health Center #9 is a very good clinic," said Barbara Gray, who sat in the center's comfortable waiting room on a recent afternoon. "The center helps when the job is snatched from under you or you get laid off for a week. Out of respect and honor for our neighborhood clinic we should pay something."

Mildred Moore, a patient and 17-year Germantown resident, also said she didn't

mind the new fees. "I would rather pay something than for them to close it down, because it would be detrimental to the neighborhood," she said.

But not everybody is yet on board. "I think it's horrible," said Ethel Urban, another longtime patient.

Nesmith said Health Center #9 has tried to make the change as easy as possible by providing notices and by talking to the clinic's patients about the fees associated with all visits. Although those with insurance will still not be responsible for co-pays, the change will take some getting use to for all, she said.

The sliding scale fees will range from \$5 to \$20 per visit, depending on income. Patients will also be required to show proof of income, such as pay stubs or Social Security payments. Although some patients say the paperwork is a headache, Nesmith said it was required to determine the amount a visit will cost.

Many patients were relieved to hear that the center's pharmacy department wouldn't be charging patients to fulfill prescriptions. However, they were unaware that it would be undergoing some changes as well.

All told, each year the city health centers dispense some 600,000 prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines, according to the Health Commissioner's budget testimony. Under the new plan, the pharmacies will not carry over-the-counter medicines, with the exception of pediatric Tylenol. "The ... changes will result in a partial year savings of \$1.5 million," said Schwarz.

WMAN Zoning Committee Will Not Oppose New Courtland

By **SUE ANN RYBAK**
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Seven residents attended the West Mt. Airy Neighbors' Zoning Committee meeting on Wednesday, December 2, at Summit Presbyterian Church, 6757 Greene St., to debate New Courtland Elder Services' application for the Independent Living Apartment Building it wants to build adjacent to the Cliveden Convalescent Center, 6400 Greene St.

"We decided not to oppose the requested variance as long as certain provisos are met by the applicant," Ralph Pinkus,

committee chair said. Among those provisos are the removal of an existing shed and disposal of trash storage on Cliveden Convalescent Center property, an increase in shrubbery to provide an adequate buffer zone, and light stanchions that would not be offensive to property owners.

Although the meeting ran over two hours and became heated at times, only two attendees opposed the application.

The proposed five-story facility would contain a community room with a kitchenette, a laundry room on each floor, two offices, a garden courtyard, a Neighborhood Computer Center, and 75 free parking spaces for residents and family

members. Each one-bedroom apartment would be 560 square feet and include a full-size refrigerator and stove.

Proposed security features include outside cameras, a manually-operated door, and Health Sense, a health maintenance system that contains a wellness component. Health Sense uses sensors to monitor daily life activities and vital signs such as blood pressure, weight and blood sugar levels remotely, allowing residents to age in place.

The apartments are built with the "lowest income seniors in mind," Max Kent, senior project manager for New Courtland Elder Services said.

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