

Medical clinic expands care for uninsured



R. Clayton McKee / Chronicle

Dr. Aijaz Ali Khowaja points to a map listing the expansion plans for the Ibn Sina Foundation community clinic. The \$1.4 million facility that will be built on Wilcrest will be five times larger than the current 1,000-square-foot clinic with more medical and dental services available.

July 13, 2005, 9:24PM

A HEALTHLY GOAL

Alief-area medical clinic expands care for uninsured

The Ibn Sina Foundation plans \$1.4 million site to help patients

By **BETTY L. MARTIN**
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There is little that illustrates the need for more medical clinics for lower-income and uninsured families in Alief than the Ibn Sina Foundation-run clinic on Wilcrest.

Starting from an idea in 2001 by the Ibn Sina Foundation to create a clinic at 11246 Wilcrest to serve poor, under-insured immigrant populations in the southwest Houston and Fort Bend areas, the clinic is now planning a \$1.4 million facility on Wilcrest. This site will be five times larger than the current

RESOURCES

PATIENT CARE

Ibn Sina Foundation-run clinic on Wilcrest serves a growing patient care service for low-income and uninsured patients.

- **Expansion** : Clinic directors will build a \$1.4 million facility at Wilcrest and Stancliff Road.

- **New location**: The site will offer medical and dental care. It's slated to open in July 2006.

1,000-square-foot clinic, with more medical and dental services available.

In Ibn Sina's brochure, foundation chairman Nasruddin Rupani and vice chairman Dr. Dilawar Ajani estimate the clinic at Wilcrest and one opened in 2004 in Clear Lake have served 15,000 patients, about 30 people daily, and the number is growing rapidly. While Ibn Sina was established by Houston's Muslim and South Asian community, its clinics have seen an 118 percent increase in its African-American patients, a 67 percent increase in Hispanics and 46 percent increase in Anglos in four years.

Ibn Sina's care will be expanding, too, to offer new services that include ultrasound, expanded care for mothers and children, ophthalmology, dental, cardiology and stress testing and enhanced elderly care and pharmacy assistance.

"The genuinely poor can't afford to go to the pharmacy, so we will provide services that are free for them," said Aijaz Ali Khowaja, Ibn Sina Foundation secretary and chief executive officer, who manages the Wilcrest clinic on afternoons Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays.

"We had 6,450 last year and this year we are expecting 8,000 outpatient visits," said Ali Khowaja, 44, a Sugar Land resident and the foundation board's secretary and chief executive officer. "We are extending the hours, beginning in September, to 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday."

As of July 4, 2006, when the proposed clinic is scheduled to open next door to the existing Wilcrest clinic, the foundation is expecting the one-year patient tally, judging from the outpatient traffic so far, to exceed 12,000.

The foundation has received financial support for the expansion and services from the city of Houston, Cullen Trust for Health Care and other private and governmental agencies "all working together in a partnership for the same goals," Khowaja said.

The expansion will incorporate the services the clinic provides now, such as immunizations, screens, health education, primary care by volunteer physicians,

gynecology, urology and cardiology clinics, mother and child care, and diagnostic services.

The Ibn Sina Foundation will be one of several medical service groups offering free health screenings at the Alief Community Health and Civic Resources Fair. Hosted by SAVE, or Stand Against Violence Everyone Alief, and Notre Dame Catholic Church, 7720 Boone Road, the health fair is 9 a.m.-2 p.m., July 30.

Other agencies at the event will include the Houston police and fire departments, Red Cross, YMCA, CHIPS and Gold Card. Screenings will include, for qualifying low-income residents, free mammograms and prostate tests.

Khowaja, who received his master's degree in Glasgow, Scotland, in the field of public health, and is finishing his doctorate at the University of Texas School of Public Health, said South Asians in Houston make up about 70 percent of Ibn Sina's caseload.

The immigrant population that is Ibn Sina's focus is a hard group to serve, he said, because many delay treatment because they lack documentation or because they can't afford the \$25-per-visit — \$30 for those with insurance — for consultation at the clinic.

The clinic offers free services to those who can't afford the fees so that people with symptoms that could develop into serious illnesses will not delay their treatment, Khowaja said.

With the latest group of immigrants from African nations, the clinic has seen three open cases of tuberculosis and several patients with HIV/AIDS who are referred to the Harris County Hospital District and the local disease control agency, Khowaja said.

"I'm very worried about it. Tuberculosis we haven't seen since the 19th century and in 2005, we see it," he said. "We need to have a real strategy to prevent those diseases. We need to control AIDS among the people who are migrating to the United States, particularly in the African-American groups, ages 25 to 45 group."

AIDS is a problem in the community that Ibn Sina has not yet addressed, he said.

Increase in patient care

Much more frequently, the clinic has seen a 21-percent increase in heart disease, 16-percent increase in diabetes and 11-percent increase in respiratory infections. One of the biggest increases, Khowaja said, is among Houston's South Asian population. About 80 percent are at the federal poverty level, or \$38,000 annually for a family of four and many delay treatment for cardiovascular disease, diabetes or breast cancer, Khowaja said. One woman, upon learning the test results that showed a malignant growth in her breast, told Khowaja that her belief in God would preclude any need for treatment.

"We need to educate the community. They think this treatment is too expensive, or that there is a loss of their hair for women growing through chemotherapy, and Ibn Sina is very sensitive to their issues. Our volunteers work very hard to encourage them to follow up on treatment," he said.

In a recent survey, 62 percent of the South Asian woman studied had high cholesterol and said they do not go and do physical exercise at an exercise facility because they are shy or do not speak English very well, Khowaja said. Twenty-seven percent of the South Asian men surveyed smoke, "and diabetes is seven times higher among South Asians than the whites, which is really very bad," Khowaja said.

Originally from Pakistan, Khowaja has been in Houston's public health business since 2000, and said Ibn Sina is trying to help overcome the need for medical service in the "underserved" area.

There were 46 million uninsured people below age 65 in 2004 in the United States, he said. In 2002, 800,000 uninsured residents lived in Harris County, Khowaja said. That number is now to one million, "which means that 30 percent of the population is uninsured or underinsured," Khowaja said.

Even with private, independent agencies like Ibn Sina and the Harris County Hospital District's plan to expand hospital and primary care resources and offer seven new federally qualified health clinics in Houston by 2015, "Houston has a long way to go" in closing gaps in needed mental health and primary care services for the poor, Khowaja said.

"We are aggressive in our outreach education program, showing slide projector pictures and saying this can happen to you, particularly infant mortality because they don't do family planning and the child death and maternal death is high," he said. "I have seen too many children and too many mothers die, where it could have been prevented."

Khowaja was a recent speaker at the Alief Super Neighborhood meeting and explained Ibn Sina's goal of assisting the uninsured and under-insured indigent in a "culturally competent and conducive environment."

With about 65,000 people living in the Alief area, the community needs "many community clinics" besides the clinics scheduled to open on Bellfort and, under a five-year-plan, a Harris County clinic on Boone Road on city-purchased property previously used by Metro's now-closed Alief Transit Station.

Dan Hrna, Alief Super Neighborhood president, encouraged members to put money in Ibn Sina's collection canisters in Houston grocery stores.

"A lot of people don't realize what a great thing we have in Alief. Ibn Sina is money well spent," Hrna said.

For more information, call the Ibn Sina Foundation at 832-328-1680, or the Wilcrest clinic at 281-990-7462.