



THE HOUSTON  
COUNTY VOLUNTEER  
MEDICAL CLINIC

Offering  
*Hope & Health*  
in Houston County

**L**ack of health insurance is a frightening reality for nearly 20 percent of working Americans between the ages of 18 and 64. Unfortunately, many families in Houston County live this reality everyday.



Board chairman Jack Steed, Dr. Georgette Chickeri, board member Margie Cox and Vicky Betrossoff, RN

### Improving the Health of the Community

“The idea for a free medical clinic really started with the Warner Robins Chamber of Commerce and its board of directors,” explains Jack H. Steed, chairman of the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic Inc. board of directors. “Mercer University conducted a study and found there were more than 20,000 people in Houston County who were uninsured or did not have sufficient insurance. Establishing a volunteer clinic was entered as an item on the chamber’s annual Program of Work because they foresaw the need for healthcare assistance in the community.”

With the rising cost of health insurance, Houston County employers, particularly small businesses, are finding it increasingly difficult to offer their employees affordable insurance coverage. Because private health insurance is too costly for these employees to purchase on their own, they are unable to afford preventive healthcare and must delay seeking medical attention until it is unavoidable.

“Many of our friends and neighbors are without health insurance and have chronic illnesses such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes and asthma which go untreated or undetected until an event occurs that lands them in the emergency room or the hospital with possible long-term and preventable consequences,” states David Campbell, executive director of Physician Services and Managed Care with Houston Healthcare and one of the driving forces behind the Houston County Volunteer Clinic’s formation. “Their medical problems could be controlled and the consequences prevented through regular medical care and treatment.”

With an initial \$75,000 donation from the Houston Medical Center Auxiliary, as well as additional funding from Community Health Works and many generous individuals and businesses, the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic opened its doors in January 2005. Located in the former Parkway Med-Stop building owned by Houston Healthcare on Russell Parkway, the Volunteer Clinic is a



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—Horatio V. Cabasares, MD



non-profit facility whose purpose is to provide free primary, non-emergency, medical care on an appointment-only basis to working, uninsured citizens of Houston County. Reduced or free prescription medications are also available through the Community Health Works Patient Assistance Program, which has a representative onsite in the Volunteer Clinic.

"The clinic's goal is to serve the Houston County community by improving the health status of these individuals who are working and valuable members of our community. Only neither they, nor their employers, can afford medical insurance," comments Campbell. "Because they are employed, these individuals do not qualify for Medicaid. They are trying hard to make ends meet and are unable to stretch their financial resources enough to cover the additional cost of healthcare."

Physicians on staff at Houston Medical Center and Perry Hospital, along with a number of retired physicians and others from the community, including nurses, medical

technologists and registration personnel, serve as volunteer staff for the clinic. In addition, local accountants and attorneys volunteered their time to help form the non-profit corporation. Founding board members Jack Steed, Barbara Shaheen, Dr. Dan Callahan, Dr. Kathy Keebaugh, David Campbell, Dr. Tony Alford, Beth Jones and Michelle Callahan volunteered to oversee the project and to serve the clinic in that capacity for a number of years.

"We are helping those patients who may otherwise not get the care that they need, especially the ones with chronic conditions that can be controlled if caught early, keeping them out of the emergency rooms. It's best for everybody whether you have insurance or not," explains Georgette Chikeri, MD, a volunteer physician for the clinic. "We also provide free medication to our patients, which is huge. Some of our patients have hundreds of dollars of medication that they take every month."

Vicky Betrossoff, RN, director of the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic, believes the clinic helps everyone in Houston County indirectly. "I think one aspect of the clinic is that it helps to keep our patients out of the emergency rooms because they don't have to wait until their condition gets really bad. They will come to the clinic to receive chronic condition care," she says. Betrossoff says the Volunteer Clinic consistently reflects a savings of between \$60,000 and \$80,000 in terms of indigent healthcare each quarter.

Steed agrees. "The clinic enables people who are working and trying to do the best they can to take advantage of medical attention and avoid some of those catastrophic situations," he adds. "A healthy employee is a happy employee, and a happy employee is a productive employee. It really benefits the community in improving the health status of its citizens."

Horatio V. Cabasares, MD, general surgeon and chief of staff of Perry Hospital, believes the Volunteer Clinic is very important to the citizens of Houston County. "If we don't take care of those who are without any health insurance, the standard of healthcare in our area will suffer," he says. "Statistics show that emergency rooms are being overloaded by people who have no health insurance or who are considered indigent because there is no other avenue for them to seek medical help in areas that do not have volunteer clinics. If that continues, it would place a severe strain

on our emergency rooms and lower the standard of healthcare in the United States."

According to Betrossoff, patient response has been tremendous since the clinic opened in 2005. "We started with six patients and currently assist more than 600," she says. "We keep a constant waiting list for new patients." Despite the waiting list, the Volunteer Clinic has been a true life saver for some of its 600-plus patients. "There have been several instances where the clinic has actually saved lives by identifying problems in time and getting them taken care of," comments Steed.

### Saving Lives

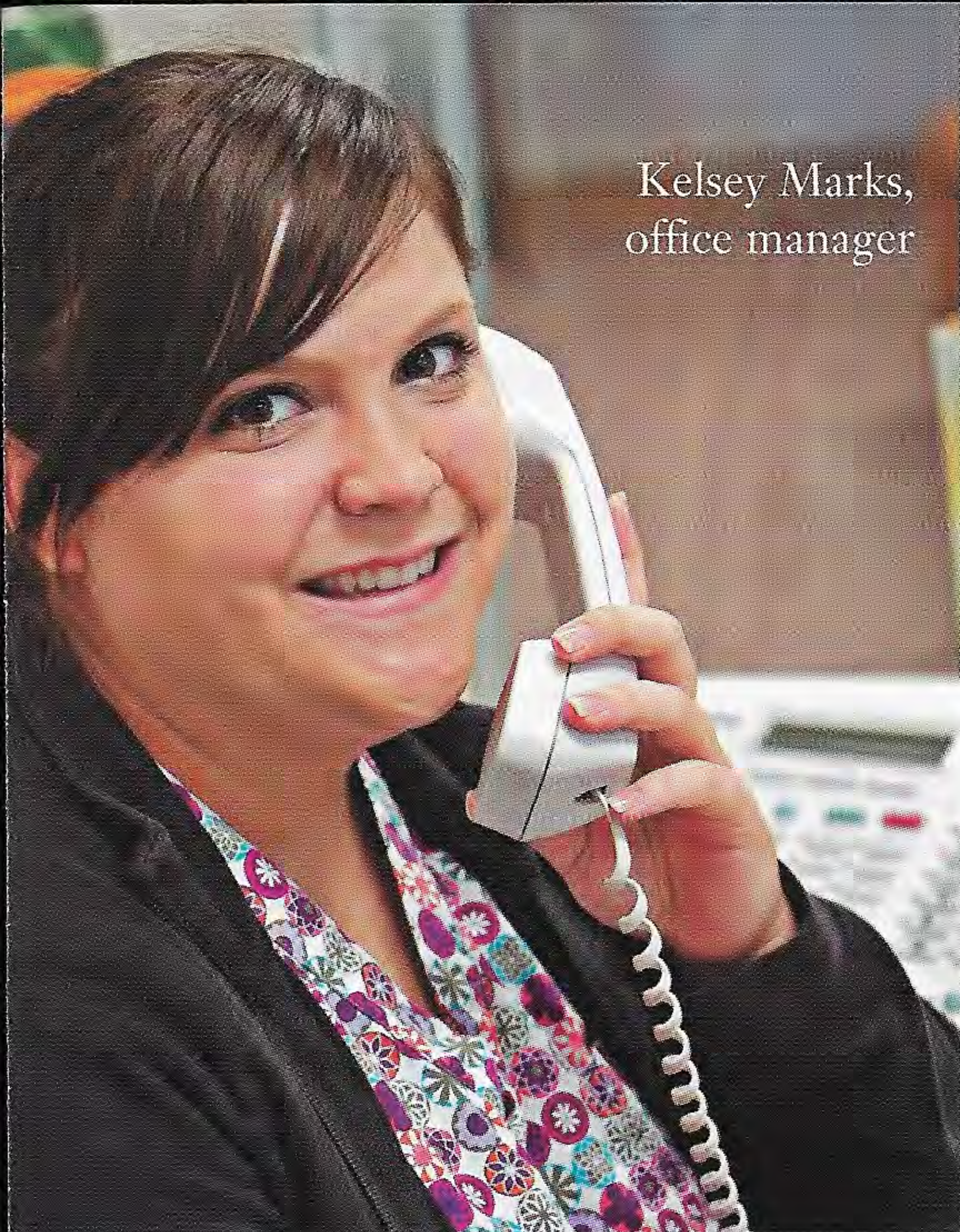
Imagine being a hard-working, single mother of two children and a young granddaughter and finding a suspicious-feeling lump. Imagine not having any medical insurance to pay for a diagnosis, much less treatment. That's the reality Angela Davis of Warner Robins faced in 2005. Although she was working full-time, she did not have health insurance through her employer and could not afford to see a physician for the lump she found in her throat. Luckily for Davis, the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic was available.

"The doctors at the Volunteer Clinic hoped the lump was just a regular thyroid glandular problem," explains Davis. "Unfortunately, it turned out to be thyroid cancer. I would not have gone to see a doctor had the clinic not been here."

As soon as the lump on her throat was diagnosed as cancer, Davis was referred to Dr. Cabasares to undergo surgery. Thankfully, says Davis, the cancer had not spread, and the lump was removed without complication. "After surgery, I underwent two radioactive iodine treatments. The doctors believe all of the cancer is gone, and my prognosis looks good," she adds.

According to Dr. Cabasares, had the Volunteer Clinic not been available, Davis' outcome would have been very different. "For all practical purposes, she would probably not have received any treatment until her condition became very serious," he says. "Then she would have been looking for a physician who would negotiate with her on a fee. The next problem would have been trying to find a hospital that would take her as an indigent patient."

In the past, cancer patients like Davis were referred to the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta where students in the medical



Kelsey Marks,  
office manager

teaching program would take care of them, adds Dr. Cabasares. Unfortunately, the Medical College no longer offers this assistance for indigent patients.

Davis feels it is important to have a facility such as the Volunteer Clinic available because it offers people like her hope and a chance to receive medical attention. "Without the clinic, I would have toughed it out or gone to the emergency room and somehow paid the medical bill," she says. "I have used the ER before when I've been sick. They treated me and sent me home with instructions to follow up with my family doctor. Having no health insurance, I didn't have a family doctor to follow up with."

Davis' daughter is grateful the Volunteer Clinic was here for her mother. "I'm very glad someone opened the doors to the clinic to our family," says Christine Varnadoe. "My brother and I couldn't make it without our mother, and we are so very thankful that someone was here to help her."

For Davis, the Volunteer Clinic was truly a lifesaver. "My children are very important to me," she says. "Being a single mom, I think about not being here to see them grow and accomplish things in life. I have a three-year old granddaughter who I want to see graduate and get married. If I had not come to the Volunteer Clinic, I wouldn't have been able to do that. I thank God every day that it is here."

George Gamblin knows exactly how Davis feels. Diagnosed with congestive heart failure at age five, Gamblin has been on medication to keep his heart functioning for the past 17 years. He even had a defibrillator surgically implanted to shock his heart into a normal rhythm when it began to beat too fast, which had become more and more frequent. Twenty-

two years old, unable to work, uninsured and living with his mother, Gamblin's medications were costing him \$1,200 to \$1,500 out of pocket each month, the majority of which he could not afford. He needed help.

"If the Volunteer Clinic had not been here, I don't know how we would have paid for George's medications," says his mother, Angela Lefholz. "I'm an educated person, but I had no idea what programs were available that could help him. Then someone told me about the Volunteer Clinic."

With the help of Betty Mifflin, care manager with Community Health Works, Gamblin was able to obtain approval for supplemental Social Security benefits and Medicaid coverage for his much needed medications. "Mrs. Betty was a lifesaver," comments Gamblin. "She is like a second mom to me. I don't know what I would have done without her."

According to Gamblin, his initial visit to the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic for help with his medications ultimately led to him receiving a heart transplant. Dr. Keebaugh agreed to become his primary care physician and referred him to Rahil Kazi, MD, a cardiologist on the medical staff of Houston Medical Center, for additional treatment. Despite everyone's efforts to maintain his heart's health, Gamblin suffered an almost fatal episode in February 2006. While driving to deliver pizza, he says his heart went into arrhythmia making his defibrillator shock him more than 15 times in a two-hour period.

His mother believes it is a miracle he is alive today. "The emergency room doctor at Houston Medical Center saved his life," she says. "Someone higher up had a purpose for Georgie."

Following that near fatal attack, Gamblin was referred to Emory Healthcare's Heart Failure Therapy Center in Atlanta where he was placed on the heart transplant waiting list. Miraculously, he waited only seven weeks before receiving a new heart on September 6, 2006, and was at home recuperating one week later. He is doing fine now and credits the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic for saving his life.

"The Volunteer Clinic played a huge role in the whole process," he comments. "It's where everything started. Without Dr. Keebaugh and the rest of the volunteers, I don't know where I would be today."

Betrosoff believes it is outcomes like Davis' and Gamblin's that reinforce the need for the clinic and make the efforts of its

volunteers worthwhile. "For individuals suffering with chronic illnesses, the lack of health insurance can affect the quality of their life as well as its length," she explains. "That is so true for both Angela and George. If they had not come to the clinic when they did, they both would not have had access to the quality and level of care they needed to live."

### Giving Back

For many of its patients, the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic offers more than just free health care. Some, like Davis and Gamblin, are so grateful for the help they have received they come back to volunteer at the clinic as a way of saying thank you.

"Like most of us, we live paycheck to paycheck and were doing without until it got bad," comments Bobbie White, a patient and volunteer at the clinic. "Everyone here is really caring, nice and helpful."

In the past, White says she has encountered staff in other assistance programs who don't seem to care about the individual needing help, instead treating them like a number. But that's not the case at the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic. "They really care about people. I volunteer at the clinic because I love what they are doing, and I want to help in any way that I can."

Dr. Chikeri agrees. "In the time that I have been volunteering, I have seen people develop more hope and become more confident in their ability to take care of their own healthcare situation."

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—Georgette Chikeri, MD



As with any non-profit organization, the Volunteer Clinic faces the never-ending challenges of recruiting volunteers as well as locating additional funding. "There is always a need for more doctors to come on board and participate. We are constantly recruiting volunteers," comments Betrossoff. "Donations of any kind are always needed and appreciated. We have a low budget, but we do a lot with the limited funding that we do have."

Steed concurs. "Even though the physicians and other staff volunteer their time and services, the clinic still has operating expenses such as utilities, custodial services, insurance liability and so forth," he says. "It takes more than just volunteers. It takes money, although there is a lot done with a little."

Since its formation, the clinic has received a number of donations and grants from many areas of the community including a \$7,100 grant from Community HealthWorks. A major financial supporter from the beginning, the Houston Medical Center Auxiliary continues to support the clinic's efforts donating an additional \$10,000 earlier this year. Most recently, Daniel A. Deighton, MD, urologist and chief of staff of Houston Medical Center, presented a donation of \$7,500 to the Volunteer Clinic on behalf of the hospital's medical staff.

Dr. Chikeri says she enjoys helping the community by volunteering her time at the clinic. "I enjoy practicing medicine, and I enjoy coming here and working with the patients and the staff," she adds. "There's a lot that's wrong with the healthcare industry now,

and there are varying opinions as to how to fix it. But this is a way right now that people can help. I think once they volunteer, they will enjoy themselves and really feel like they are making a difference."

White wishes people in the Houston community realized just how good the Volunteer Clinic is for people like her. "I appreciate what they are doing to help me and others like me here in Houston County," she says. "The clinic is a wonderful thing, and I'm glad it's available."

Steed says the Volunteer Clinic will be able to provide free health care services to the uninsured and underinsured of Houston County only with the continued support of the community. "The clinic is proud to be a United Way agency, and I encourage everyone to consider designating the Volunteer Clinic as your agency of choice during the upcoming annual United Way giving campaign," he adds.

Businesses, churches, civic groups or individuals interested in making a donation to the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic can do so by contacting Jack Steed at (478) 929-3888. In addition to monetary donations, the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic suggests donations of office, exam room and cleaning supplies. For a list of needed supplies, please contact Vicky Betrossoff at (478) 923-9730.

*Tara Poole*

*Photography by Ken Krakow*

**The Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic** is located at 125 Russell Parkway in Warner Robins. The office is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. Pre-qualified patients are seen by appointment only during clinic hours on Monday and Thursday from noon until 8 p.m., and on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 a.m. until 1p.m. For more information, please call (478) 923-9730.

### **To qualify for medical services through the Houston County Volunteer Medical Clinic:**

- You must live in Houston County.
- You must be 18 to 64 years of age.
- You or your spouse must be employed.
- You must have no health insurance.
- Your family's gross income must be 200 percent or less of the poverty level.
- You must provide proof of your family income.
- You must provide identification.
- You must provide your Social Security Number. *(There are exceptions to this policy.)*

