

Below and on opposite page, Wesley Health Center provides basic family practice services to women, children and families in a medically underserved community in Phoenix, Ariz.



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# ‘Caring and Competence’ at Wesley Health Center

WESLEY COMMUNITY CENTER'S  
HEALTH PROGRAM PROVIDES HIGH-  
QUALITY CARE TO UNDERSERVED  
COMMUNITIES IN PHOENIX.

by NILE SPRAGUE



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Since August 2003 Wesley Community Center's service to the Phoenix, Ariz., community has included a licensed health center, *Centro de Salud*. It started in the original community center building constructed in 1953 and expanded to include three exam rooms built by NOMAD retirees who travel the country doing volunteer work at United Methodist mission institutions. The health center served 3,500 patients between August 2003 and January 2006 and offered basic family practice services, including checkups, preventive health care, diabetes testing and more, primarily for women and children. It was destroyed by arson in 2006, but it was quickly rebuilt and reopened in April 2007.

Today, the health center is still providing a much-needed service, filling a gap by providing high-quality medical care for the uninsured, underinsured as well as those who have health insurance.

During a recent visit to the center, I met Loreta,\* 35, and her only child, Julia,\* 9. In the past, her husband was employed in construction, and the family received health insurance through his work. He lost his job with the recent

recession, and with it went the family's health insurance.

"I started coming to this health center about two years ago," Loreta said in Spanish. "Now I come for my annual woman's checkup and all my other medical needs. I drive about 45 minutes to come here. There are other health centers closer to my house, but I am willing to travel the extra distance because I like it here.

"The doctors and assistants are very attentive — they patiently answer all my questions, and they are very friendly. The doctors I went to before would only look at a specific ailment and didn't have much time to answer questions. The other clinics often didn't have anyone who spoke Spanish. Maybe they would have one interpreter, but if she was busy, you couldn't communicate."

Loreta and her family moved in with her mother-in-law and live on her husband's unemployment benefits. "The prices for health care here are very reasonable. My mother-in-law and my husband also come here for their medical care," she said.

## Federal stimulus grant

In June 2009 the name of the clinic was changed to Wesley Health Center after it received a federal economic stimulus grant as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, an Obama administration effort to create jobs after the 2008 stock market crash. Wesley Community Center's health program equally shared a \$3.9 million grant with three Arizona health centers.

The new funds allowed the center to increase services, staff and facilities. Two more general practice doctors were hired full-time, including Dr. Kathleen Brite, who had an emphasis in women's health. Six new exam rooms and a procedure room for women's health were added. Many additional staff were hired to enable extra services and programs, such as regular diabetes and nutrition classes and the training of medical students to help serve increased patient numbers.

"Before receiving the federal grant, the center had three exam rooms only, and we were desperately trying to get all the patients through," Dr. Brite said. "At one point, we said, 'Let's just make a bathroom into an exam room,' because we didn't have enough space."

Jim Maxwell monitors his blood pressure at Wesley Health Center. Left, a new mother secures health care for herself and her infant at the center.



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Private insurance companies often want doctors to complete an exam in about 15 minutes, but if a child cries or a woman has questions and concerns, that time is inadequate. Dr. Brite said the center enables her to take more time with her patients.

“At Wesley, we still end up seeing 20 or 25 patients a day, on par with other health practices, but we just don’t rush,” Dr. Brite said. “Having medical students helps a lot.”

Ninety to 95 percent of the center’s patients speak Spanish only. “The cultural and language barriers are challenging, but I’m learning every day and my Spanish continues to develop,” Dr. Brite said.

### Preventive care

Leonora,\* 39, and her mother Felicia,\* 71, participate in nutrition and diabetes

prevention classes taught by Ana Guzman-Rojas, the health educator at Wesley Health Center. When I met Leonora, she had her first child, a newborn girl, in her arms. Leonora doesn’t work outside the home, and her husband is the kitchen supervisor in a restaurant.

“I am not insured,” Lenora said. “Before Wesley Health Center, I had nowhere else to go for health care before. I once went to another clinic, but the consultation was very expensive, it cost me about \$150 there, and here the same would cost only \$40. I think this clinic is unique in the quality of service and low price. Every visit here I learn something new from the doctors.

“I received a mammogram here, and then started coming regularly when I learned I was pregnant. I got all my pre-

natal care here, including my prenatal plan for monthly and then weekly checkups, an ultrasound, and my gynecological checkups. I also took prenatal classes, received information about diabetes, and the staff helped me with a referral to the hospital for the birth.”

Leonora’s mother, Felicia,\* was diagnosed with diabetes and came to the Wesley Health Center four months later to get glucose, diabetes and cholesterol tests. She had also received a mammogram, free for women over 55 thanks to a grant covering components of women’s health, and other medical treatment at the center. Following the diagnosis with diabetes, she started taking a nutrition class in diabetes prevention and learned how to prevent high cholesterol and high blood pressure.

“I have learned how to eat more nu-

tritionally and about healthy portions,” Felicia said. “It was new information for me. I no longer eat whatever I want — now I take more care. The things I have learned in the classes have helped a lot in reducing my blood sugar level, which I test with a blood sugar monitor provided free of charge by the health center. I didn’t clearly understand what diabetes was until I came to the class, but now I can take more care with my health and share my newfound knowledge with other people.”



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Center patient Jim Maxwell, 74, has health insurance through Medicare. He drives for about an hour each month to come to the Wesley Health Center, although there are clinics closer to his home. “It wouldn’t occur to me to go to other clinics, even though I could,” he said.

“I come here because of the high quality of care. If there were two words I would use to describe Wesley, they would be *caring* and *competence*. Clearly, caring is irrelevant if there is no competence. It is an understatement to say that the quality of care at Wesley is far superior to the health care I was receiving prior.

“In my entire life, I had never had a doctor call me personally, they would always delegate to someone else. However, my doctor here did call me personally about two weeks ago, and said, ‘You’ve been on this new medication. We need to do a checkup to see if it’s working.’ That’s why I’m at the clinic today.”

Mr. Maxwell said the doctors at Wesley reassure him that it’s OK to ask questions even if that process takes time. “I’m very conscious of a doctor’s time, and I keep saying, ‘I’m taking up too

much time,’ but he would tell me, ‘It’s all right.’” Mr. Maxwell said. “He’s really genuinely interested in my well-being, and I always leave here feeling better than when I arrived.”

Wesley Health Center’s expansion and dedicated staff provide an underserved population with high-quality health care at accessible prices, in a multilingual environment where they are comfortable and able to communicate effectively. All of these factors combine to provide an exceptional level of health care, something that all women, children and men deserve.

*\*Note: Some names have been changed to protect identity.*

**Nile Sprague** is a photojournalist and frequent contributor to **response**.

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