

LOCAL

# Program puts uninsured on path to better health

## ■ AccessHealth clients get blend of education, treatment

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SENECA — Many Upstaters are caught in a vicious circle: being too sick to work and too broke to get the medical attention they need to get better to find work.

State legislators have declined to accept federal Medicaid expansion funds, private insurance costs continue to rise and many are left without access to health care.

Mountain Lakes AccessHealth, a pilot program launched more than a year ago on the Oconee Medical Center campus in Seneca, has targeted those on the outside looking in with education, access to doctors and medicine and aggressive case management.

"They treat you like you're somebody," says Lee Adkins, an unemployed mill worker struggling with asthma and high blood pressure. "You don't come to these places because you're a bum; you come because you're in bad shape."

MountainLakes AccessHealth is not an insurance plan. It matches uninsured patients with medical providers and education to treat their various maladies. There are regular diabetes management and smoking cessation classes, as well as coaching for diet and hypertension and the like. Doctors donate their time, and Oconee Medical Center's pharmacy helps with prescriptions. Case workers help clients identify benefits for which they may qualify and monitor their progress.

More than 40 clients have "graduated" from the program thus far, completing classes and finding medical homes to

continue managing their health issues.

"We see the need in this office and send them to volunteer medical providers," said Corti Nations, the executive director who helped found Mountain Lakes. "This program has really exceeded my expectations. Our goal was to impact health outcomes and overall well-being ... and I've been very pleased with that, because that means we met our goal to help people get better."

Lee Adkins and Amanda Roach are getting better, and they give the credit to Mountain Lakes' staff. The Salem couple couldn't find doctors willing to treat them without cash up front, cash they didn't have because both have been out of work. Adkins has looked for work but thinks his health has excluded him from consideration by employers. Roach applied to Social Security for disability several years ago and is still navigating that process, while her arthritis, anxiety and other symptoms have worsened.

"They are wonderful," Roach said. "They take the time to listen to you and help you out. I'm a prediabetic and Adam (Shick, nurse case manager) has helped me with diet; what I can eat and what I can't eat. I stay calmer now, and it seems like me and Lee have lost a little bit of weight."

Adkins agrees. He has become a convert to drinking lots of water ("I kinda like it, to tell you the truth ...") and is thinking long and hard about giving up smoking, although he says that will be much easier said than done. The education, combined with regular medical care provided by Dr. Stan Rampey of Seneca,



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Amanda Roach talks about her experiences at the Mountain Lakes AccessHealth clinic as Lee Adkins sits nearby. The uninsured couple are using the clinic to learn how to care for their medical problems.

is making a big difference.

"I've got a lot more energy than I used to have. I did more this weekend than I used to do in a month," Adkins said.

Mountain Lakes is one of nine such AccessHealth programs funded by The Duke Endowment and monitored by the South Carolina Hospitals Association. Its 2012 annual report claims more than 10,000 clients served statewide, with coinciding drops in emergency room visits and inpatient discharges.

Nations is leaving the program to take over the Oconee Medical Foundation, but Mountain Lakes

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Lee Adkins, uninsured mill worker

won't stray far from her thoughts or grant-writing efforts. A dental clinic specializing in extractions is on the drawing board for this fall, with space already set aside inside the medical center.

She expects AccessHealth to get bigger and better as time goes on.

"Our community is so

philanthropic," Nations said. "They will continue to donate and we will see the impact on patients."

Mountain Lakes has a waiting list, but potential clients and donors are encouraged to contact the office for more information at [www.mtlakesaccesshealth.org](http://www.mtlakesaccesshealth.org) or 864-885-7341.

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