



The good doctor

Dr. Florence Jameson, founder and CEO, Volunteers in Medicine of Southern Nevada

When you think of people dying because they don't have health care, usually you picture a developing country. Or an uninsured person struck by a catastrophic illness.

The reality is sadder and more mundane. Every month, five people in Southern Nevada die from a lack of access to health care. And we're not talking about advanced chemotherapy or organ transplants. They die because they can't afford to visit the doctor, or pay for common drugs to control diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma.

"In our backyard, all around this valley, in what we call a civilization, we have people dying from lack of medicine," said Dr. Florence Jameson, founder and CEO of Volunteers in Medicine of Southern Nevada.

In December 2009, Jameson, a small staff and an army of volunteers opened a small clinic in Paradise Park to help people who need health care. It's nothing fancy: A small waiting area and a handful of exam rooms tucked behind a brick wall and a rose garden. In its first year, the clinic had about 5,000 patient visits.

Some of them saved patients on the verge of becoming one of the statistics. One story, in particular, stands out in Jameson's mind. A middle-aged woman came in complaining of high blood pressure and crushing headaches. Clinic providers promptly put her on a regimen of drugs to stabilize her blood pressure, which was causing the headaches. And then they did more: They found out about her life. They discovered she had recently lost her job at a casino and, more devastating, lost her son to the war in Afghanistan. She had almost lost her will to live, too, until volunteers at the clinic helped her restore it by treating her blood pressure, depression and broken heart.

"We work so hard not just to be a mill where you dispense medications," Jameson said. "But we also show that we care and give the gift of compassion."

Jameson knows firsthand what a big difference a generous medical provider can make. After her father went to prison, Jameson's mother struggled to provide for herself and her five children. But they never went without health care because the family doctor assured her he would take care of her children, regardless of her ability to pay.

"I thought that I would always be a person like that," Jameson said. "I wanted to be in a position where I could help people."

Jameson, 56, didn't get that chance until she established her medical practice -- she's an obstetrician -- and raised her family. She sees patients and delivers babies -- and devotes the rest of her time to Volunteers in Medicine.

Jameson's vision includes two more clinics, one on Martin Luther King Boulevard near the center of the city, and another in Henderson. Volunteers in Medicine already raised enough money to fund operations for next year at the Paradise Park clinic, and a benefactor donated land on the Westside for the flagship clinic. Now the organization needs \$2.8 million for construction.

After that, Jameson hopes to recruit more volunteer doctors. Many of the current volunteer doctors give time when they can get away from their own private practices. Jameson would like to recruit more retired physicians to meet the needs of an expanded patient base. She plans to do all this with a paid staff of four and more than 520 volunteers.

"We are building the airplane as it flies," she said. "We are working on improving the actual providing of medical care. There is so much to perfect to give the best quality care possible." AMY KINGSLEY