



## Joan Aragone column: Samaritan House looks to the future

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Even as Samaritan House honored Dr. William Schwartz, 77, and Dr. Walter Gaines, 91, as co-founders of its free medical clinics at a fundraising gala Saturday, administrators for the nonprofit agency were considering ways to meet the growing demand for its medical services.

"We have a unique model, totally based on volunteers," said Sharon Petersen, director of program operations at Samaritan House. "We need a constant influx of volunteers, especially in these times when people are losing their jobs and health insurance."

Samaritan House, which started in 1974, provides free services to low-income San Mateo County residents, including food, clothing, shelter, worker assistance and counseling.

But as the nation's health care system appears to enter a state of free-fall, especially for those with limited incomes, Samaritan House's free medical clinics assume growing importance.

They serve the "working poor," who earn too much to be eligible for Medi-Cal, don't receive health insurance from employers and can't afford to pay medical expenses on their own.

"We see people at rocky times in their lives. They stumble and can't afford care," said Schwartz. "When the high-tech bubble burst, for example, we got a

lot of high-tech people for a time."

Last year the clinics — one in San Mateo and one in Redwood City — were visited 9,000 times, providing primary and specialty medical care, dental services and medications.

In contrast to some free clinics, Samaritan House provides direct service to patients, all free of charge — a result of volunteering doctors and other medical personnel and through arrangements with Mills Peninsula Hospital in San Mateo and Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City.

Equipment is donated, and medicine is purchased in generic form or occasionally donated from doctors' offices. Volunteer specialists are also available.

The clinics have only eight staff members.

"The focus of our current volunteer recruitment is on primary-care physicians," Petersen said. "We have a wonderful community of doctors who have been working with us for years."

A standard commitment is a few hours per week, but the clinics can accommodate physicians for any available time.

"Even three hours a month is fine," she said.

Dentists are especially needed. "The wait for dental care is six to eight months," she said.

The notion of a free clinic staffed by volunteers occurred to Schwartz, an internist in private practice in San Mateo, in the 1980s. Practicing since 1961, he was thinking ahead.

"I had been taking care of some clients for free but felt a need to give back in my retirement," he said.