

With Your Help, Care Continues During Pandemic

On March 13, Fred Weisman Americares Free Clinic Director Jenn DaSilva received the news: the coronavirus pandemic had reached Fairfield County, and COVID-19 cases were surging.

But DaSilva and the other clinic directors had patients to treat—patients who couldn't forgo care. So, Americares Free Clinics made a rapid shift to telehealth. And soon, they began to hear from patients with symptoms of the disease.

DaSilva and her team knew Mateo* was not feeling well. But at the time, COVID tests were scarce, and Mateo didn't meet CDC criteria for testing.

But when Mateo joined a regularly scheduled telehealth session, Americares health workers saw his illness had worsened and immediately referred him to a local hospital. In the hospital, Mateo's condition deteriorated—he was placed on a ventilator.

"The hospital called saying, 'we need your help talking to the family because we've done everything we can—we don't think we can do anything else,'" says DaSilva. "But the family was not willing to let go, so everybody kept trying. The hospital staff were excellent—they were learning new things every day and immediately put them to work for Mateo."

Slowly, Mateo's condition began to improve. After 28 days, he came off the ventilator. Today, Mateo is back home with his family.



When the coronavirus pandemic reached Fairfield County, Americares Free Clinics made a rapid shift to telehealth. At the time of this photo, staff were following CDC-recommended COVID safety protocols.

Mateo's isn't the only COVID case Americares Free Clinics has seen. In the first four months of the pandemic, the clinics referred more than 150 patients for testing—60 percent of the tests came back positive.

"Americares Free Clinics patients are the essential workers you hear about in the news: They're grocery store clerks, delivery drivers, custodians and home health aides," says Americares Free Clinics Executive Director Karen Gottlieb. "They have been keeping our communities going throughout the pandemic, but they're risking their lives every day."

Americares Free Clinics have supported patients with COVID—or those suspected of having the disease—with referrals for testing, education about the disease and home isolation kits. Today, the clinics are reopening their doors to patients needing essential appointments. And they are continuing to support patients recovering from COVID.

Since Mateo's discharge from the hospital, DaSilva and her team have connected him with the resources he needs to deal with complications following his illness, including follow-up MRIs, physical therapy and weekly one-on-one appointments—all at no cost.

"We made a difference in this man's life. We monitored him, we diagnosed him, we got him to treatment and access to the care he needed. When he got really, really sick, we were a support system for his family. We listened," says DaSilva. "We were there when he was discharged, and we will continue to be there for him throughout the long-term effects of COVID."

* = name changed



Americares Free Clinics staff regularly check on patients with COVID symptoms. At the time of this photo, staff were following CDC-recommended COVID safety protocols.



From the Executive Director

Thanks to You, No Gap for Chronic Disease Patients

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way health care providers around the world connect with their patients. For AmeriCare Free Clinics, that meant embracing telehealth.

“Just because COVID is forefront in our minds, it doesn’t mean chronic diseases go away,” says Veronica Sullivan, director of the Bob Macauley AmeriCare Free Clinic of Norwalk. “So, we took on the challenge. Once we figured out a telehealth platform, we took off.”

AmeriCare Free Clinics conducted more than 3,300 telehealth consults during the first four months of the pandemic. And clinic staff know telehealth will be part of providing comprehensive care from now on.

“Telehealth is here to stay—incorporating it now has opened the window to future opportunities,” says Sullivan. “Telehealth expanded the way we can connect with our patients, and it will allow us to provide care to more people.”

When patients struggle to take their medication correctly, weekly telehealth check-ins have shown to get them on the right course. And in



Before the pandemic, staff and chronic patients relied on office visits. Now, patients like Samuel (left) call in for care.

addition to regular checkups, many Free Clinics patients rely on a steady supply of medication to manage their chronic disease.

“During a time when many of our patients are worried, stressed and unsure of what the future will bring, AmeriCare Free Clinics has been there for them,” says Sullivan.

Dear Friends,

I hope you and your loved ones are safe and well and that you have not personally experienced the health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please know that, because of your support, AmeriCare Free Clinics continues to care for patients during the pandemic. To keep staff, volunteers and patients safe, we quickly pivoted to telehealth—appointments by phone and video—when the WHO declared a pandemic and Connecticut activated its restrictions.

We missed physically seeing our patients—we missed the hugs! Still, we discovered telehealth is a powerful tool and, for some of our patients, the frequent check-ins are even more effective in managing their chronic diseases.

So, I’m calling this pandemic a crisis-tunity—an opportunity born of crisis.

Our staff and board of directors are amazing. Because they knew that patients were dealing with cuts in income as restaurants and stores closed, staff put out a call for grocery-store gift cards for patients in need.

Thank you to the clinic staff whose unwavering support has kept our clinics open. As we enter this next phase, the risks continue, and their dedication grows.

You are part of this community of caring. Thank you for your continued commitment to and support of AmeriCare Free Clinics. We should all be proud of what we’ve accomplished during this difficult time.

Sincerely,

Karen Gottlieb

Volunteer News

“AmeriCare makes it easy to do great things.”

Dr. Howard Eison is an internist and volunteer at the Bob Macauley AmeriCare Free Clinic of Norwalk. He continued volunteering throughout the pandemic, holding telehealth consultations with patients.

Q: What’s changed for you since the coronavirus pandemic began?

A: Everything. One of the many things I love about AmeriCare Free Clinics is the translators. They’re excellent. During these pandemic days, they’ve become invaluable with the telehealth visits.

Q: What has adapting to telehealth been like?

A: I think we’ve done a phenomenal job doing telehealth. A lot of our visits are video. That’s really helpful because you can learn so much just by seeing the patients in their homes or workplace. And they don’t have to travel or take off from their jobs to get their medical care. But even when it’s just an audio phone call, we’re still meeting 95 percent of their needs through telehealth.

Q: What are you hearing from your patients about COVID’s impact on them?

A: The patients are under incredible stress, both emotionally and economically. It’s added a whole additional layer to their care. They need to go to work—their lives literally depend on it. So, between that and the worry that the patients have about catching COVID, stress is a huge problem.

Q: Even throughout the pandemic, what has your experience been like as a volunteer?

A: These are the best hours of my week. And AmeriCare has taken down so many of the barriers to excellent care so that I don’t have to think too hard to figure out an alternative way of getting care for my patients. AmeriCare makes it easy to do great things.

Voices from the Clinics

“I’m so happy we provided critical medications.”

By Muguette Maignan, AmeriCares Free Clinic of Stamford director

Around mid-March, Executive Director Karen Gottlieb sent a message to the AmeriCares Free Clinics directors, elevating our COVID-19 response to Level 4: There were several cases within our service area, and a pandemic had been declared. We knew we had to continue serving patients—and that it was critical to keep our staff and volunteers healthy.

The clinic immediately went into telemedicine mode. Our front-desk staff called every patient with an upcoming appointment to explain the new process. We gave out blood pressure machines and glucometers to newly diagnosed diabetic patients and made videos demonstrating how to use the machines.

We continued managing our patients’ care three days a week. The other two days were designated as patient medication pick-up days. Patients picking up medication called when they arrived. To avoid face-to-face contact, we placed a bag of their medications on a small table outside. We watched from behind the glass door as the patient walked up to collect their medicine.

Those moments were bittersweet. I was so happy we provided critical medications, but I felt awful I couldn’t comfort my patients with the smile behind my mask. We also gave out home isolation kits—wipes, hand sanitizers, masks and



Stamford Clinic Director Muguette Maignan (right) worked throughout the pandemic, dispensing medicine and scheduling telehealth appointments. At the time of this photo, staff were following CDC-recommended COVID safety protocols.

gloves and instructions on home isolation—hoping we would have enough to last through the end of the pandemic.

Many patients called with questions about COVID—or with symptoms of the disease itself—and we followed CDC guidelines to provide referrals for testing and education around at-home care.

The situation at the Stamford clinic remains fluid, and we are ready to adapt. We’re in this for the long haul and will continue supporting our patients—whatever this pandemic may bring.

In Honor and Remembrance: Dr. Arnold Pearlstone



AmeriCares Free Clinics mourns the loss of Dr. Arnold Pearlstone—friend, supporter and longtime volunteer.

Shortly after retiring from private practice in 2010, ophthalmologist Dr. Arnold Pearlstone contacted AmeriCares Free Clinics asking how he could help. While ophthalmology had always been on the Clinics wish list, staff did not have the

medical equipment to perform eye exams—or the resources to purchase it. Without hesitation, Dr. Pearlstone donated all the necessary equipment through his private foundation, and the AmeriCares Free Clinics ophthalmology program was born. But Dr. Pearlstone didn’t stop there. He made volunteering a family affair by recruiting his daughter, Leslie Shain, a nurse, to assist him and persuaded his daughter-in-law, Dr. Melissa Pearlstone, an OB/GYN, to volunteer, as well.

Dr. Pearlstone’s ophthalmology program began at AmeriCares Bridgeport clinic and expanded to Norwalk, Danbury and Stamford, distinguishing him as the only volunteer out of more than 200 to work at all four clinic sites. The program is critical for patients with diabetes who face an increased risk of vision impairment and blindness. Before Dr. Pearlstone joined AmeriCares Free Clinics, many of these patients often skipped eye screenings due to cost.

At the time of his passing, Dr. Pearlstone had volunteered more than 1,100 hours and screened 1,112 free clinic patients—altogether providing more than \$738,000 in free medical care for our neighbors in need.

Free Clinics

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A Patient's Story: Eva

Eva* cleans homes for a living. With two young sons at home—and a family to support in Ecuador—she needs a steady income.

“I’m the breadwinner for my family,” Eva says. “They depend on me.”

In April, one of Eva’s coworkers began to develop COVID-19 symptoms. Soon, Eva began to feel ill with a sore throat, fever and severe body aches.

Eva immediately called the Boehringer Ingelheim AmeriCares Free Clinic of Danbury.

“When Eva called and told us she’d had contact with a COVID-positive person, we were deeply concerned,” says Clinic Director Dina Valenti. “She’s been one of our patients for years, and we knew how little she could afford to be ill.”

Although Eva had classic COVID symptoms, she couldn’t get tested. At the time, COVID-19 tests were only available at drive-up sites, and Eva doesn’t own a car.

But clinic staff firmly believed Eva had contracted COVID and diagnosed her as a presumptive positive case. Eva sent her young sons to live with a friend during the worst of her illness.

“In this moment, I was sad. Because all the news—the people were saying they were dying,” says Eva. “I said, ‘I have two sons here. I can’t go.’”



With AmeriCares Free Clinics support, Eva recovered. Clinic staff provided her with an isolation kit, which helped to keep the virus from spreading to her family, as well as pain management medicine and educational resources.

“Without work, Eva became food insecure, so we gave her food and grocery store gift cards to help lighten the load,” says Valenti. “We were thrilled to see her health improve—we know her sons depend on her.”

Today, Eva is reunited with her family. She continues to receive ongoing medical care from the clinic, including regular telehealth consults.

“The clinic has always helped me,” Eva says. “They’re my angels.”

* = name changed