

→ GOOD CAUSE: CHRIST COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES The Site of Augusta's First Hospital to Open Soon as Health Center

Christ Community Health Services of Augusta, which first began seeing patients at 1226 D'Antignac Street in November of 2007, will soon have a new base of operations. The Historic Widow's Home located at 124 Greene St. in the Olde Town subdivision is expected to start receiving patients this June after the renovation of the first floor is completed.

"What is neat about this place is that it has an incredible legacy," said Ronald Skenes, CCHSA director of communications and development. "This was the site of the first hospital in Augusta, which evolved into what is now Georgia Health Sciences University and the first local school of medicine. It was originally built for the widows of Confederate soldiers in 1877, which is why it is still called the Widow's Home and it has been a shelter for women ever since up until 2003 when it had to be closed down and remained empty for a number of years."

In 2003, the property was purchased by Clay Boardman, who then generously donated it to Christ Community Health Services in 2007.

Following the completion of the first floor, twelve new exam rooms will be available to support the uninsured and underinsured of Augusta. The project is being renovated by RW Allen and funded by CCHSA, who make it their mission to provide affordable health care to those with no insurance.

"When we got 1.9 million dollars on hand, we had enough for them to do the entire first floor and rough in the second floor, which is the first phase of our construction project," said Skenes. "After the first phase, we can start seeing patients while we work."

The 2.5 million dollar project, which began last October, will add a parking lot and patient entry to the rear of the historic Widow's Home, preserving its authenticity. At the same time, CCHSA plans to continue operating out of the D'Antignac Street facility and expanding their operation at both.

"This year has been great for us; we have seen a lot of growth both patient and staff-wise," said CCHSA Executive Director Jeff Drake. "We have our minds on this project right now, but we also have two new physicians coming in August so we will be able to crank up the volume and make our presence known in Olde Town."

CCHSA already has a total of ten exam rooms in two buildings owned by University Hospital and allocated for their use. They have 25 staff members, including three full time physicians and two nurse practitioners.

"We are off to a solid start this year, having seen 900 patients just in the month of February," said Skenes. "Those numbers have been increasing every year we have been open and we hope to keep up that growth."

Doctors Robert Campbell and Grant Scarborough, both specialists in internal medicine, have been with the project since the beginning. In August 2010, Dr. Russ Ayers joined the practice and specializes in family medicine.

"[Drs. Campbell and Scarborough] are both internal medicine and they went that route so they could see anyone who comes in the door, from infants to senior citizens," said Skenes. "[Dr. Ayers] did family medicine for very much the same reason, so he could see people of all different ages, but it is not a specialty so much as a broad, general category that allows him to treat a wide range of individuals."

In addition, a major goal of CCHSA is to help train Georgia medical professionals, which is why there are four internal medicine residents in their second year of a three year rotation who see patients twice a week.

"We are equipped to do any kind of primary health care and aim to give it to as many people as possible" said Skenes. "Things like diabetes or high blood pressure cannot be treated effectively in an emergency room, which is where many of these



THE WIDOW'S HOME ON GREENE ST. HAS UNDERGONE EXTENSIVE RENOVATIONS.

"Keeping [people] healthy all the way through their life, rather than just when things get bad, is bound to be less expensive in the long run and leads to an overall better quality of life."

—JEFF DRAKE, CCHSA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



THE INITIAL RENOVATION PHASE IS EXPECTED TO BE COMPLETED BY JUNE.

uninsured are forced to go because they cannot afford regular doctors visits. We can take care of these basics needs like annual physicals and checkups. That is what we do all day long."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Communities Survey in 2009, there are 70,000 people in Aiken, Richmond and Colombia counties with no health insurance. This number does not include people from the counties of Lincoln, Thompson, Millen and Edgefield who are also seeking treatment.

"Our services start at \$25, depending on the amount of their insurance and the number of people in their household, but the most we ever charge is half the cost of the medical expenses," said Skenes. "The rest is funded by money that comes from people in the community who have made donations, churches, companies and foundations. People like what we are doing and

like the mission and want to support what we are doing."

"If you do not have insurance a lot of doctors will not even let you in the door and you have very limited access to primary health care when you need it," said Drake. "We want to help the uninsured community, including the working poor who is employers do not have health insurance, and homeless patients who have been referred to us by one of the service organizations we work with. Keeping them healthy all the way through their life, rather than just when things get bad is bound to be less expensive in the long run and it leads to an overall better quality of life for the people we help."

In order to make a donation or to schedule an appointment, call 706.922.0600.

article and photos by CHRISTOPHER SELMEK