

Free clinics

From A1

She did not have the money to do anything about it — and these days, Virginia’s free clinics are short of the resources they need to help people who, like the Kowalchuks, fall between the many cracks in the American health care system, which is why Del. Betsy Carr, D-Richmond, and state Sen. Barbara Favola, D-Arlington, are asking the General Assembly to lend a hand.

At the clinic, once staff found treatment for the usual explanation of dizziness — middle ear problems — was not helping Kowalchuk, they quickly arranged for a neurologist to examine her, free of charge, as well as for the MRI scan that found the tumor.



Phillips

“It was big; the surgery would cost a lot,” Kowalchuk said. Health Brigade stepped in again, working long-nurtured connections with surgeons and hospitals to arrange the operation, again free of charge, and to negotiate a discount and payment plan for Kowalchuk to afford follow-up scans.

As new, if elderly immigrants, sponsored by their children, the Kowalchuks could not get Medicare — and from what they had heard about the cost of health care here, doing something about Wladimiro Kowalchuk’s cancer scare was a frightening prospect.

“Robert was my husband’s angel. His guardian angel. He is my angel,” said Kowalchuk, referring to the clinic’s veteran medical case manager, Robert Key, who took the lead helping the couple navigate his cancer treatment and later her surgery.

Free clinics help 75,000 a year

Virginia’s 60-plus free clinics provide care to some 75,000 people a year, amounting to some \$114 million in 2022. It is a distinctive kind of care, too: focused on all of the needs a patient might have — including some that do not always come to mind when people feel they need to see a doctor.

Virginia General Assembly



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Kowalchuk saw the difference several months after her surgery. She had come back from a trip to her attic with a painful rash on both hands.

“I called dermatologists and they said they could give me an appointment in two or three months,” she said. “The pain is really strong, I’d say, but it didn’t make any difference.”

A visit to a hospital emergency room prompted a suggestion to see a dermatologist. She stumped three doctors at a local doc-in-a-box.

“I finally came to Health Brigade,” she said.

The nurse “looked at my hands and said; ‘That’s an infection’ — the ER doctor said it wasn’t that,” Kowalchuk said. “She said, ‘I’ll give you an antibiotic; if it is not better in two days come back and we’ll figure it out. The first day I was a little better; the second day, a lot better.’”

Paying attention is the key

It is paying attention, maybe even more than being able to offer free access to care, that is the key to what free clinics provide, said Karen Legato, Health Brigade’s executive director.

“We look at the whole person ... it’s not the transactional model,” she said.

That means, for instance, making sure a patient’s electricity is on and that they have enough food. Health Brigade will arrange connection with food pantries, for instance, and can help people access emergency help with utilities to make sure they are warm enough in winter and not overheating in a summer hot spell. If transportation is a problem, case managers and social workers figure out ways



MARGO WAGNER, TIMES-DISPATCH

Tatjana Kowalchuk and medical case manager Robert Key talk at Health Brigade in Richmond on Feb. 13 about how much they mean to each other. Kowalchuk calls Key her guardian angel.

to deal with that.

Health Brigade’s distinctive outreach efforts, like its syringe exchange program, take similar extra steps, when staffers offer COVID-19 and flu vaccinations, clothing in the winter, and assessments of other medical or dental needs as well as a path to getting them treated.

Free clinics are stretched

But that whole-person approach, especially in the wake of COVID-19, is swamping Virginia’s free clinic network.

Coverage through Medicaid was expanded, “and all of a sudden, people who weren’t insured were coming in,” Legato said. “We had people who didn’t know what they had, and we were finding complex, chronic conditions ... and now that Medicaid is going away for them, they’re on our rolls and we’re taking care of them.”

Costs are rising, too.

The free clinics compete with hospitals and private practices for physicians, nurses and other medical staff. Staffing accounts for about 80% of Health Brigade’s budget, for instance — free clinics do get a bit of a break on the biggest driver of medical cost increases in other parts of the health care system: prescription drugs.

“It takes a big heart to do this, but people need to be paid,” Legato said. “Even so, a nurse

practitioner here may be making 30% less than in private practice.”

A squeeze on volunteers

There’s been a squeeze, too, on the heart of the free clinic model: the volunteers.

COVID-19 kept many away, as clinics tried their best to make sure they did not become hotspots. Statewide shortages in some specialties — behavioral health is a particular problem — mean many volunteers who used to pitch in cannot find the time and relief from their own patients’ demand to spare.

That has meant larger paid staffs than had been the pre-pandemic pattern.

Rufus Phillips, CEO of the Virginia Association of Free and Charitable Clinics, said budget amendments proposed by Carr and Favola would offer some relief.

“Virginia’s free and charitable clinics are the backbone of our Commonwealth’s health care safety net,” Carr said in a statement.

“With Medicaid unwinding and the end of pandemic relief as well as increased economic pressures disproportionately affecting underserved communities, the need to sustain free clinics has never been greater,” she said.

The amendments call for a \$5 million-a-year bump in state funds for the clinics, for an an-

nual total of \$10.3 million. The current \$5.3 million a year was set in 2016, with the idea of covering about 30% of the clinics’ costs. It currently accounts for about 18%, Phillips said. The clinics’ operating costs since then have climbed 170%.

“If you look at clinics in 2016 and now, you’ll see big differences, too,” Phillips said. “They’re adding dental care, wraparound — supports for the social determinants of health; food pantries, even delivering food and showing people how to cook unfamiliar food.”

And in the end, it is the staff — paid and volunteer — and the way they see the people who need their services, that make a difference.

So in spotting a concern in Kowalchuk’s once-every-six-month lab tests for a kidney issue last December, her nurse asked her to come in for another test last month, and with that suggested an every-three-month schedule “just to be sure my kidneys are still OK,” Kowalchuk said.

“You know, they also have a mental health service,” she said. “They’ve been a real help after my husband died ... I can get down ... I have my daughter and her husband, my neighbor — she’s very nice — but I really don’t know many people here.”

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Budgets

From A1

The Senate plan also blocks additional money for the Washington-area subway system that is a priority for the House and a likely key to the arena project.

The House Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations committees — both led by Democrats — balked at the net \$1 billion cost of the governor’s tax plans over the next two fiscal years and instead redirected nearly \$1.4 billion in tax cuts to their own priorities, retaining only his proposal to broaden application of the sales tax to digital services.



Krizek

The Senate also proposed to apply the sales tax to services that businesses buy from one another — for a total \$1.3 billion in additional state revenues over two years. It also restored \$243 million for local school divisions that the governor proposed to cut, two years after promising it as compensation for the decision to cut the portion of the sales tax on groceries that went to localities based on school-age population.

Youngkin: It’s ‘just the start’

Youngkin isn’t taking “no” for an answer to his tax plan.

“As I begin my review of today’s proposals from the House and Senate it will be through the lens that structural balance matters, that Virginians can’t afford another tax increase and, in fact, need additional tax relief,” he said.

Youngkin’s statement also emphasized investments in education, law enforcement, economic and workforce development, and behavioral health in the state.

“Today is just the start, and I am confident that working together with the General Assembly we can continue the progress we’ve made in our first two years and move the Commonwealth forward together.”

Lucas against arena project

The Senate committee, led by



MICHAEL MARTZ, TIMES-DISPATCH

Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, center, chair of the Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee, renewed her opposition to the arena project and to the governor’s tax cut plan. She is flanked by staff committee director April Kees and Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Charlottesville.

Chair Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, had already refused to consider stand-alone legislation for the arena project, while the substantially revised House proposal survived the session’s midpoint as a vehicle, along with the budget, for high-stakes negotiations over the last three weeks of a session scheduled to adjourn on March 9.

Lucas made clear after Sunday’s meeting that she will not support the proposed Monumental Sports & Entertainment District, regardless of negotiations.

“I’m still concerned that this is a bad deal for the commonwealth,” she said.

Lucas, a 32-year veteran who relishes her new role as the first Black person to be chair of the powerful Finance Committee, also blocked additional money in the Senate budget for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, or WMATA. Metro funding is a top priority for the House, which included \$149.5 million over two years to help plug a \$750 million operating deficit for the transit system, which is critical to the Northern Virginia economy.

“I feel like Metro has not done a good job of managing their resources,” Lucas told reporters. “They need to get their act together.”

In contrast, the Senate proposed \$92 million in toll relief in Hampton Roads, which Lucas said “will be the top priority in the next four years of my term.” The plan would give 14 free toll trips a week to those making less than \$50,000 a year, forgive unpaid toll charges for all drivers and provide free E-ZPass toll transponders.

The priority was much different in House Appropriations, where Del. Paul Krizek, D-Fairfax, chairman of the transportation and public safety subcommittee, stirred a ripple of laughter when he reminded the committee that Northern Virginia generates 45% of state tax revenues.

“A healthy and successful WMATA system benefits Virginia as a whole,” Krizek said.

Lawmakers plan bigger raises for state workers

State employees, more than one-third of whom live in the Richmond area, and state-supported local employees would receive 3% raises in each year of the proposed House budget and 2.5% a year in the Senate plan. Teachers would receive raises of 3⅓% each year under the House plan and 3% each year under the Senate proposal.

Del. Rodney Willett, D-Henrico, chairman of the compensation and retirement subcommittee, said Youngkin’s proposals — a 1% bonus for state employees and teachers the first year, as well as raises of 1% for state employees and 2% for teachers in the second year only — are “insufficient” to keep pace with inflation.

“In the area of employee compensation, if you are not moving ahead, you are falling behind,” Willett said.

\$1 billion more for K-12

Public schools would be the biggest winners, as the Democrats who control the House and Senate push to invest heavily in education

to carry out recommendations in a report by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission last year that shows Virginia far behind other states in funding for K-12 schools. The JLARC report released in July estimated that Virginia is providing \$1,400 less funding per student than the average for other states.

House Appropriations Chairman Luke Torian, D-Prince William, said “it would be premature” to make major changes in the Standards of Quality funding formula, as JLARC recommended, without further study. Still, the House committee recommended an additional \$1 billion for K-12, focusing on the goal of bringing salaries to the national average or above; supporting “at-risk” students living in low-income households; and helping pupils learn the English language.

Senate Finance proposed \$1.6 billion in additional spending on K-12, removing a 15-year cap on state funding of school support positions and using general tax revenues for teacher retirement contributions instead of the Literary Fund. That would allow local school divisions to tap the fund for up to \$300 million to replace or modernize old school buildings.

In higher education, an area that Torian said Youngkin “largely ignored” in his proposed budget, the House proposed \$205 million to reduce tuition increases and expand degrees awarded in high-demand fields and \$51 million for community colleges to increase workforce credentials. The Senate proposed \$73.8 million in need-based undergraduate student aid and \$10 million in aid for graduate students.

The House budget supports the governor’s proposal to add 3,440 Medicaid waiver slots for people with disabilities, but proposed to phase them over two years while boosting the Medicaid rates paid to those who provide services. The plan includes an additional \$457 million for mental health and substance abuse services, especially focused on those provided in communities.

The House and Senate both proposed a reserve fund of \$125 million to \$150 million because of unexpected increases in Medicaid participation and expected increases in rates paid to hospitals.

Both plans also include nearly \$80 million to pay for raising the mini-

mum wage for consumer-directed personal care attendants to help seniors and people with disabilities remain in their homes. Youngkin does not support legislation to raise the minimum wage, ultimately to \$15 an hour, but the issue could be one of the bargaining chips for the governor to gain assembly support of the arena project in Alexandria.

Lawmakers reject Youngkin’s tax plan

The money to pay for these proposed investments came largely from the rejection of Youngkin’s proposals to cut income tax rates by 12%, raise the sales tax by 0.9% and broaden its application to digital services, instead of only taxing the sale of goods. The only part of the plan that survived was the sales tax on digital services, as both chambers carried over other proposals for major tax policy changes, including those proposed by Democrats, for study by a joint subcommittee over the next year.

In proposing to apply the sales tax to some services, “the governor was correct,” Torian said. “It makes no sense to pay sales tax when you buy a Blu-ray disc but don’t pay a tax when you download the same movie from a digital retailer.”

Lucas said Youngkin’s tax plan “is not sustainable,” although she called the application of the sales tax to services instead of just goods “only fair.”

While both committees endorsed the proposed budgets by unanimous votes, Senate Minority Leader Ryan McDougle, R-Hanover, said the five Republicans on Senate Finance opposed the decision to eliminate the governor’s tax plan.

“There were a lot of things that were positive in the budget, but there were a number of things we want to work on,” McDougle said.

The governor also will not like the House proposal to direct the Department of Environmental Quality to reenter the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, from which Youngkin forced the state to withdraw. The House budget directs about \$100 million in expected revenues from the initiative for deposit in the Community Flood Preparedness Fund in the second year.

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