



## The Free Clinic Committee at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

Logan Grant Mills; Swetha Ramamurthy; Patti Pagels MPAS, PA-C;  
Nora Gimpel MD

*University of Texas Southwestern, Dallas, Texas, USA*

### **Introduction**

The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center (UTSW) is affiliated with five (5) community partners to operate seven (7) Student-Run Free Clinics. Our clinics serve a very large and diverse population that includes homeless men, women, and children, uninsured patients with low income, non-English speaking immigrants, and transgender men and women. The clinic operations of the UTSW SRFCs are supported by volunteer student managers that serve a full year term with their community partner. These students typically begin their term in November of their first semester of medical school. This allows for students to familiarize themselves with the individual SRFCs and adjust to the academic requirements of medical school before committing to this role. Each of the UTSW SRFC has anywhere from 6-8 managers per community partner. These clinics once operated independently of each other, but often encountered similar obstacles in their execution. Some examples included volunteer and physician recruitment, volunteer training, and having prolonged clinic hours. In order to help facilitate discussion and efficiency among all of these SRFCs and improve the quality of care provided to our community, students and faculty formed a collaborative committee called the Free Clinic Committee (FCC) in 2015. This committee is comprised of one to two Medical Student Managers for each community partner, one Physician Assistant Manager, and four faculty sponsors. This committee is tasked with facilitating discourse among the free clinics, developing strategies to improve the clinics, supporting students' scholarly and research activities, and identifying funding opportunities for the SRFCs.

### **Accomplishments**

In the past year, the FCC has made significant progress in the development of the SRFCs collaborating with UTSW. Some of this year's accomplishments include facilitating two Free Clinic Summits, hosting two Volunteer Skills Workshops, coordinating a common medical student manager application for the SRFCs, and applying for an AAFP Foundation Family Medicine Cares grant. We have also made progress on ongoing projects to implement more opportunities for interprofessional education in the free clinics and form a new collaboration with a community partner to help serve the healthcare needs of the transgender community in Dallas.

---

### *SRFC Summits*

Free Clinic Summits are held bi-annually to introduce new managers to the SRFCs collaborating with UTSW and brainstorm techniques to improve the quality of the SRFCs. These summits are held as half day sessions in November and April. Each of these summits is tailored to a current need for all of the SRFCs and include panel discussions with medical school administration, presentations on public health financial assistance programs in the Dallas area, and presentations on the progress of fourth year medical student research projects conducted in the SRFCs. These summits have led to the development of a new UTSW SRFC website for disseminating information about the SRFCs, and the implementation of new managing techniques in the free clinics. The UTSW SRFCs website provides information about each member clinic, how volunteers can be involved with the clinics, who the managers and faculty sponsors are for the clinics, and volunteer resources to aid in the training of volunteers. Additionally, clinics with prolonged hours have adopted a bedside teaching format that helps create not only a positive learning environment for students, but also helps educate patients on their body and wellbeing.

### *Skills Workshops*

Practicing medicine in a SRFC as a medical student has many challenges. Not only are there potential learning or confidence gaps for medical students early in their training, but there are also limitations on the services that can be provided in a SRFC. The majority of SRFCs collaborating with UTSW provide minor acute care, but some also provide specialty care and can refer patients for additional services. To help bridge the learning or confidence gaps that medical students may have, the FCC has implemented Volunteer Skills Workshops. These workshops are tailored to bridge the pre-clerkship curriculum at UTSW with providing clinical care in a primary care setting. We have offered students the opportunity to learn from fourth year medical students, residents, and faculty on how to collect a strong history of present illness, perform a focused physical exam, and concisely present their findings to an attending, as well as how to check a blood pressure, conduct an EKG, collect a shave or punch biopsy, and suture a minor laceration.

### *Service Learning*

In the past year, 296 student volunteers served 2,778 hours in the SRFCs under supervision of UTSW faculty. These encounters have provided students with an immersive experience for providing medical care for the underserved communities of Dallas. First and second year students are able to interview these patients and learn about the factors that influence the patients' access to medical care. For some patients, the SRFCs collaborating with UTSW become their primary source of healthcare. In addition to learning about social determinants of health, students are able to interact with third and fourth year medical students to advance their note-writing and physical exam skills.

## **Challenges**

These tasks were not accomplished without challenges. Coordinating students, faculty, and community partners individually has inherent difficulty, and as such coordinating each of these groups of people at the same time can be a major task. While the goal of all three groups is to promote the health and wellness of their populations, each group also has their own ideas, expectations, and requirements for how to reach that goal. The FCC at UTSW has become the linchpin to coordinating these groups so that each clinic may improve the care they provide for their patients, enhance students' experiences, and develop leadership opportunities for students. Since the establishment of the FCC, the number of SRFCs collaborating with UTSW has grown and the number of services offered at each SRFC has grown as students identify patient needs and opportunities for improvement within their SRFC. An unanticipated consequence of this growth is that the SRFCs have begun to require more managers to manage this large variety of services. This growth and limited supply of students has created a need to host a common application for medical students to become Medical Student Managers for the UTSW SRFCs. This application allows students to apply to multiple clinics at the same time based on their interest and preferences, but they are only offered one position. The decision to offer a student a position is based on the collaborative discussions between managers of the individual SRFCs and members of the FCC. By instituting this process, students are able to find a clinic that fits their passion and helps prevent students from holding more positions at other clinics. This unique feature of hosting a common application ensures that students are fully committed to one community partner during their year-long appointment.

## **Opportunities**

Opportunities for interprofessional education have become a growing point of interest for medical students and for SRFCs. Having the opportunity to work with students from other programs contributes to a greater mutual understanding of how these disciplines interact and complement each other when providing patient care. For example, previous collaboration with Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Pharmacy allowed Pharmacy Residents to provide short presentations of over-the-counter medications that are used to treat common conditions seen in a primary care setting. Some SRFCs collaborating with UTSW have also established a connection with local undergraduate pre-medical and pre-health professional programs to supply undergraduate students as managers for their clinic.

In order to expand interprofessional education and practice in other UTSW SRFCs the FCC has partnered with the UTSW Interprofessional Leadership Council (ILC) to survey the health profession students in the Dallas area on their interest in serving in the SRFCs. An obstacle that is consistently encountered is the lack of availability in insurance coverage for non-medical students serving in the clinics.

This year the FCC has worked with UTSW faculty to open a line of communication between students and a community partner that serves the health needs of the transgender community. The need for more volunteers and for continuity of volunteers in the clinic sparked the idea to bring medical students into the clinic. Four medical students were recently appointed as managers for this clinic and will be able to help serve the needs of our community partner.

Overall, significant progress has been made to improve the SRFCs at UTSW, but there is much more that can be done to improve and expand. The nature of the FCC yields itself to adaptation from year to year and allows its members to determine how best to achieve their goals each year. The growing collaboration, passion and interest among students, faculty, and school administration suggests this effort will be sustainable over the long run.