

Starting a Dental Clinic in an Underserved Rural County

by Chris Sramek, President, Ogallala Commons Board of Directors

The Rawlins County Dental Clinic in Atwood, KS opened in April of 2009, with a staff of three working out of a cramped space in an unused modular building owned by the hospital. The clinic is structured as a Kansas nonprofit safety-net, located in a dental professional HPSA (Health Professional Shortage Area) and is National Health Service Corp (NHSC) qualified. These designations require the clinic to see everyone in the community including the insured, uninsured, under-insured and those on government health programs.

The clinic has experienced exponential growth, seeing over 2000 patients and adding 80 new patients each month. The patient ratio is 70% uninsured, under-insured or government insured to 30% private insured. These patients are coming from up to 150 miles from Atwood. In October 2010, the clinic hired a second dentist, had a total staff of nine and moved into a new 2400 square foot facility, purchased with a Kansas Primary Care grant.

The success did not happen overnight, because the community spent 10+ years recruiting a dentist. No matter how many incentives were put into place, the young dentists choose opportunities in more populated regions, where they had a better guarantee of having patients and profits. In 2007, economic development put a business plan together that showed that a safety-net clinic, seeing 20-30% private insured would be a profitable and the NHSC designation would be the tool to recruit new dentist(s), because these dentists need a place to get experience and receive significant student loan forgiveness. Also, in the NHSC definition was terminology that included seeing private insured. A lawyer specializing in Kansas health law was hired to write a letter of recommendation to change Kansas Dental law, to include a NHSC-designated facility in the same definition of a safety-net clinic. The State granted this request, which has led to the first self supporting safety-net dental clinic in rural Kansas.

To learn more, please contact:

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