

FIT Clinic helps former inmates find quality health care

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Dr. Anjali Niyogi oversees the FIT Clinic at the Ruth U. Fertel / Tulane Community Health Center. FIT Clinic provides care specifically for people who have been incarcerated because they are at greater risk for some chronic diseases. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

People who serve prison sentences, even if previously in good health, tend to leave correctional facilities with chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, hepatitis and cancer.

Now, the Formerly Incarcerated Transitions (FIT) Clinic, based in New Orleans, is the only one in the Southeast to provide care and services

specifically for former inmates. The clinic opened in June 2015 in the Ruth U. Fertel / Tulane Community Health Clinic to give formerly incarcerated people access to primary care; insurance, medication, and government benefits support; and other services, all on the sliding-fee scale of the federally qualified health clinic.

Dr. Anjali Niyogi, who is also a hospitalist at University Medical Center (UMC) and an assistant professor in the Tulane School of Medicine, directs the clinic with help from doctors, residents and medical students who already practice or train there.

Before FIT Clinic opened, Niyogi worked with inmates through UMC's role as the contract hospital for the Louisiana Department of Corrections. When a medical student wondered how the inmates found health care after they were released, Niyogi considered addressing post-incarceration health challenges and other needs specific to former inmates.

"There was no follow-up care (former inmates) were utilizing; they were ending up in the ERs and ICUs," she said. Now, "our DOC partners know where to send them when they're coming back ... once they come here, we try to do the best we can to provide continuity of care."

Only 11 clinics like FIT exist in the United States. The clinic has no budget except for a small grant; medical students handle the case management services. Niyogi hopes to attract more grant funding in the future.

Every month FIT Clinic sees about 16 to 20 patients released from prisons and jails around the state. Nonetheless, she says, the patient base has the potential to expand. "It could blossom into an entire clinic in and of itself."