Easier access to medical care comes to local senior centers

Nurse practitioners now based at two south Palm Beach County centers.

By Lois K. Solomon, Sun Sentinel

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Senior citizens who need a quick answer from a medical professional can walk down the hall after exercise, current events or cooking class.

The Volen Center in Boca Raton and the Weisman Delray Community Center west of Delray Beach have received a grant for a nurse practitioner to do blood pressure, vision and hearing checks, manage medications, write prescriptions and advocate to clients' doctors. Although the grant expires in February, center directors hope to get additional funding to make the medical presence permanent.

"This is the wave of the future because of our changing health care laws," said Danielle Hartman, president of Ruth Rales Jewish Family Service, which operates the Weisman Center. "We want health care to be convenient to keep people out of the hospital and healthy."

Although senior citizens can see health professionals at low or no cost through Medicare or other insurance, many lack transportation, which makes a central meeting place such as a community center, usually reachable by bus or van, accessible and convenient, Hartman said.

The centers share the nurse practitioner through Genesis Community Health, a Boynton Beach-based center serving mostly low-income patients. DeAnna Warren, Genesis executive director, said health care in unusual locations, such as Target, is a trend that is likely to expand.

"People don't like the stigma of going to the doctor's office," Warren said. "We are going to see more community health centers in non-traditional settings."

In Florida, nurse practitioners can examine patients, diagnose disease and write prescriptions under the supervision of a physician.

Although there are only three nurse-managed clinics in Florida in which patients can get the full spectrum of medical care, experts say these clinics demonstrate an important aspect of health reform. The Affordable Care Act invests $15 million in these clinics, and their role is expected to expand as an estimated 30 million additional Americans get insurance under the law by 2014.

Many nurse practitioners specialize in working with patients with chronic conditions, such as those who visit the senior centers, said Kathleen Valentine, a Florida Atlantic University associate professor of nursing. Nurse practitioners supervise two clinics under Valentine's
auspices: FAU's Memory and Wellness Center in Boca Raton and its Diabetes Education and Research Center in West Palm Beach.

Senior center planners hope to work with FAU's nursing school as they define the role of their nurses in more detail. The Volen Center is building an exam room to accommodate a small clinic.

"We want our clients to be able to take our bus here, have lunch, see the nurse practitioner, go to a support group, take a class and take the bus home," said Elizabeth Lugo, Volen Center president. "They can do it as part of their day. We realized it was the core thing we were missing."

The nurse practitioner sees members and non-members. Call the Weisman Delray Community Center at 561-558-2100 or the Volen Center at 561-395-8920.