

## Health

"The biggest surprise we had was the percentage of patients we attracted without any kind of insurance."

—Sarah Hull

**Dr. Sheila Farrell** checks the heartbeat of Susan Jiik's foster child Thursday in an examination room at the Bridge Community Health Clinic in Wausau.



Rob Orcutt/Wausau Daily Herald

## Making a difference

### Clinic serves more uninsured than expected

By Randy Riebe  
Wausau Daily Herald

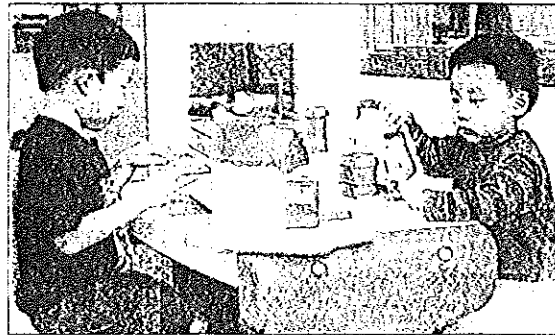
As the clinic administrator for the Bridge Community Health Clinic, Sarah Hull hasn't had too many surprises during the first year of its operation.

As expected, after an initial surge, the clinic has slowly increased its base of patients to about 1,200 — a little less than half of what it should be able to handle at capacity.

It's mission, to be a primary care clinic for low-income patients and the uninsured, is aided by a federal grant, which classifies the nonprofit clinic as a community health center.

Because of its designation, Hull had expected the clinic to see a fair amount of patients without any form of insurance, but not as many as it actually did.

"The biggest surprise we had was the percentage of patients we attracted without any kind of insurance," Hull said. "We were expecting it to be about 9 percent of our patient base. Initially, it was 20 percent, mostly because everybody called up to make an



**Brothers Blong (left) and Xiong Her** play in the waiting room of the Bridge Community Health Clinic Thursday while waiting for their appointment.

appointment right way. It's went down, but has stayed between 11 and 13 percent. Looking at it that way, we've had a bigger initial impact than we

Please turn to CLINIC/2A

# Clinic

From Page 1A

expected."

A statewide survey conducted by the Department of Health and Social Services in 1993 and 1994 estimates about 10 percent of the population in Marathon County had no health insurance for the entire year or was without it for a portion of the year.

"The numbers they've seen might be more accurate than the survey indicated," said Eleanor Cautley of the State Department of Health and Social Services. "We don't have data specific to Wausau. In general, the northern region of the state tends to have a higher percentage of people without insurance — about 16 percent — than the southern region."

Hull might even see those numbers continue to increase, said John Bartkowski, chief executive officer of the Sixteenth Street Health Center in Milwaukee.

"Our clinic and others in Milwaukee have about 25 percent of our patients without insurance," Bartkowski said. "It sounds like

they're doing very well for a first-year clinic. Those numbers don't surprise me at all. It takes about two or three years to establish a firm patient base, they could increase."

Considering it didn't have a full-time physician on staff until January, Hull said she's very pleased at how the first year went.

"By and large we've met most of the goals as far as anticipated growth that we had for our first year," Hull said. "We had a full-time nurse practitioner on staff, which helped tremendously with continuity. By August we'll have a second full-time physician and our board has also approved a part-time dental practitioner."

Luz Balmadrid is the doctor who joined the clinic in January. She said she has seen a steady increase of patients since then.

"I see a pretty wide range of patients, from the very young to the very old," Balmadrid said. "That's a good indication we're reaching who we're supposed to. Right now my schedule is full because I'm seeing a lot of patients who haven't seen a doctor before, which takes a little more time. It'll get easier as we become more familiar with each other."

Because she is seeing patients who might be visiting a doctor for the first time in their lives, Balmadrid knew the clinic has already made a difference.

"Just yesterday I saw someone I was able to refer on for additional care," Balmadrid said. "She needed it. Without the clinic, she probably wouldn't have went to a doctor."