

# Anniston Star

## **Anniston Islamic Center opening free medical clinic for uninsured**

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*The Anniston Islamic Center is opening up a free health clinic for the uninsured of Calhoun County.*

Dr. Abdul Kazi does not have to be convinced there is a significant number of uninsured residents in the Calhoun County area.

He sees them through his practice all the time.

“I see a lot of them,” said Kazi, an Anniston ophthalmologist, a specialist who treats diseases of the eye. “I try to help them out as much as I can ... sometimes I operate on them without them having any way to pay and cover them.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Calhoun County has a higher rate of uninsured people than the state average — a problem that means a lower quality of life for those uninsured and higher medical costs for the hospitals and clinics that eventually treat them. However, Kazi says, the time is right for him and his fellow physicians who attend the Anniston Islamic Center to do what they can to combat the problem.

The Anniston Islamic Center on McCall Drive will hold an open house between 2 and 5 p.m. Friday for its Salam Free Clinic for the uninsured of Calhoun County. Those uninsured who visit the clinic will receive free screenings for diabetes, high cholesterol and other conditions. Once the center has finished filling out the necessary federal paperwork for liability insurance for its volunteer physicians, the clinic will fully open in November and provide a variety of services such as pediatric and eye care, said Kazi, who is also president of the Islamic Center.

“The word Salam stands for peace,” Kazi said. “This is not a thing for Muslims — it is something we want to do for everybody — it’s what we’ve been taught.”

Equipment for the clinic, which has been in the planning stages for two years, was donated while the Islamic Center provided the seed money for the independent facility. Initially, the clinic will have eight volunteer physicians from the Islamic Center.

“But once we get the system going, we’ll invite other physicians in the area,” Kazi said.

When the clinic is fully operational, the physicians will screen patients with the assistance of area nonprofits and local hospitals to ensure the people being treated are uninsured.

“We don’t want to shift people from primary care to a free service,” said Dr. Ebba K. Ebba, a pediatrician and director of the clinic. “This is supposed to be a safety net for the already uninsured.”

Census statistics show that in 2011, about 15.6 percent of the Calhoun County population was uninsured — a higher rate than the state average of 14.3 percent.

Chris Sanders, policy analyst for Alabama Arise, said the rate of uninsured people across the state is a significant problem. Alabama Arise is a non-partisan group that advocates for the state’s low-income residents.

“There has been a general trend in a decrease in employer-sponsored insurance not just state but nationwide,” Sanders said. “What’s left is for public programs to pick up the slack or people just find themselves uninsured.”

Sanders noted, however, that the number of Alabama uninsured did not increase between 2011 and 2010, despite a consistently high level of poverty. Sanders said programs like Medicaid and a provision in the Affordable Care Act that allowed people to stay on their parents’ insurance until age 26 kept uninsured rates steady.

Rosemary Blackmon, executive vice president of the Alabama Hospital Association, said a high rate of uninsured is bad for patients and hospitals.

According to a 2011 Alabama Hospital Association survey of 88 state hospitals, 55 percent of them indicated they had experienced an increase in bad debt and charity care as a percentage of total revenues during the previous year. Also, 32 percent reported cutting staff and 11 percent reported cutting services to mitigate losses in revenue.

“Anytime you have a significant increase in the number of patients who don’t have insurance, that’s more costs that hospitals have to cover,” Blackmon said. “And the uninsured hold off on their care so when they finally do go for treatment, the condition has gotten much worse.”

For more information about the Salam Free Clinic, call 256-283-2356 or 256-454-2265.

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