

FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY:

Student Leadership at Near West Free Clinic

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Every Saturday from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm, a small church on the Near West Side of Indianapolis quietly transforms. The sanctuary becomes a vitals station, the main entrance becomes a waiting room, and classrooms become exam rooms. In just 30 minutes of setup, a fully functioning medical clinic comes to life, open to anyone who needs care. This clinic is called the Near West Free Clinic (NWFC).

Patients come for help managing hypertension or diabetes, relief from a cold or flu, or access to services such as osteopathic manipulative medicine, sexually transmitted infection (STI) screenings, physical or occupational therapy, and social work. The services are wide-ranging, but the mission is simple: meet people where they are and care for the whole person. What makes the clinic unique is not only that every service is free, but who makes it happen. The clinic is powered by volunteers who serve on patient care teams, as translators, and in many other roles. Osteopathic medical students and PA students choose to spend their Saturdays serving the community despite demanding academic schedules. Each week, at least two

licensed providers also volunteer their time to oversee patient care and teach students. The clinic is not just staffed by students; it is managed by them. From patient flow and care coordination to leadership and logistics, students take ownership of nearly every detail. They are learning medicine not only through textbooks and lectures, but through human connection, planning, listening, healing, and showing up where they are needed most. Even more uniquely, students take on these responsibilities early in their academic careers, allowing them to develop critical leadership and patient care skills.

Each spring, the current NWFC student board conducts applications and interviews to select the next group of student leaders. Applicants are asked why they want to serve, what qualifies them for the role, and why they are committed to serving Indianapolis' west side. Interviews focus on the future: How will you make a difference as a leader? How will you manage conflict? What ideas do you have to help the clinic grow? The leadership opportunities provided by the NWFC board contribute to the clinic's sustainability. The board includes positions such as Co-Executive, Director of Volunteer Recruitment, Co-Chair of Community Outreach, Director of Supplies, Director of Cultural Relations, and Director of Finance and Fundraising. In total, it consists of 12 Marian University Wood College of Osteopathic Medicine students and two Butler PA students, selected for their experience, leadership skills, and commitment to serving an underserved community. Two board members, Allie Holzworth, Director of Volunteer

Recruitment, and Ella Moritz, Director of Finance and Fundraising, reflected on how leadership at NWFC has shaped them. Near West is not simply a place to practice clinical skills. It is a space where identity, purpose, and responsibility begin to form. For Allie, working at and helping manage the clinic has been one of the most meaningful parts of her medical education. She values the opportunity to work alongside students, faculty, and members of the Indianapolis community who share a common goal. During long weeks of studying, NWFC reminds her why she chose medicine.

Ella similarly emphasizes the meaning found in immediate impact, even in small moments such as a patient realizing that help is available. These interactions reinforce her belief that medicine is rooted in service, presence, and human connection.

Leading a clinic requires more than clinical competence. Allie describes how her role pushed her to become more confident in communication and decision-making. While she previously led primarily by example, managing clinic flow and coordinating volunteers required clear verbal leadership and judgment calls that directly affected patient care. She views that growth as essential to her future role as a physician. Clinic days at NWFC are rarely predictable. Ella explains that managing the clinic challenged her preference for preparation and certainty. Each clinic day presents new problems, sometimes without a clear solution. Learning to

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NWFC challenges traditional ideas about leadership in medicine by placing real responsibility in the hands of students early in their training.

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adapt, rely on her team, and persist through uncertainty strengthened her confidence and flexibility, lessons that cannot be taught in a lecture hall but are central to clinical practice. Both Allie and Ella also recognized what makes NWFC unique. Beyond the services provided, the clinic has developed a culture of shared responsibility and support. Patients feel genuinely cared for, and over time, NWFC has become a consistent and trusted presence in the community. That same sense of community extends to the student board, where collaboration creates a meaningful educational experience. Although board positions last only one year, involvement with NWFC does not have to end when that role does. For students like Allie, whose experience at Near West has become one of the most meaningful parts of her medical education, that early investment encourages continued service.

Even after graduation, when students leave for residency and new careers, the skills and experiences gained through leadership at NWFC remain with them. Regardless of how their involvement with the clinic continues, they move forward better prepared to advocate for and care for future patients, carrying with them important lessons about service and giving back.

As medical students and board members ourselves, we can attest to how this model has strengthened our passion and purpose within medicine. It proves that meaningful leadership does not require completed training, but rather a willingness to listen, learn, and serve. NWFC stands as a powerful example of what medical education can be when students are empowered early and trusted to lead with humility, compassion, and purpose.

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