

## For this doctor, retirement during a pandemic means more hours at the free clinic

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Posted Apr 14, 2020 at 3:07 PM

Updated Apr 14, 2020 at 6:12 PM

PROVIDENCE — Dr. Marina Rodriguez knows hardship.

As a teenager, she left Cuba with her mother and sister several years after Fidel Castro launched a revolution that tore the country apart. Her mother was a seamstress in a factory. They knew little English and stayed initially with family in New Jersey.

“My mother never went to school,” Dr. Rodriguez said Tuesday. “But she had in her head that this is what we have to do.”

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Fast-forward fifty years. Rodriguez is a doctor of internal medicine who has recently retired from private practice. She has spent the last 20 years volunteering at the Rhode Island Free Clinic because they serve families who look a lot like hers.

The clinic, founded in 1991, serves people with low incomes and no health insurance. It relies on volunteers like Rodriguez to care for their patients. It is, without a doubt, a place of mercy in a merciless time.

When the pandemic hit, the clinic asked if she could come in more often.

“It was second nature,” she said. “I couldn’t say no, not when so many young (health-care professionals) are putting themselves on the line. This is what we do.”

Marvin Ronning, director of strategic partnerships and grants, said there are tens of thousands of people without health care in normal times.

“We are experiencing a tremendous surge of people who are calling,” he said. “Only those with the most urgent need are (allowed to) come in. The people who come to the clinic are the most vulnerable because of underlying health issues.”

Rodriguez’s practice has changed. Instead of meeting patients in person, she, like so many doctors, reaches out to them by phone.

“Every so often, the need is more,” she said. “We have to see them in person. They have uncontrolled diabetes. They need medication.”

Many of her patients are not sick with COVID-19. Rather they are suffering from diseases associated with poverty, diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma and injuries related to physical labor.

“These are people who are marginalized in this great country,” she said. “I try to have conversations with patients about what their lives are like. For example, people that work in factories or landscaping. They work like animals.

“The biggest fear is to be sick and have no access to health care,” she said. “I have a patient. She has a father with dementia. He is not taking his insulin. She has COVID and must stay at home. He’s at his house. They are supposed to call me tonight. This is the situation.”

When asked, Rodriguez admits she is scared. At 68, she is at higher risk for COVID-19.

“Absolutely,” she said. “We don’t have enough testing. We don’t know who has it. I’m staying home at all costs.”

Underlying the routine calls about this medicine or that, however, is a thread of worry.

“There is a lot of anxiety,” she said. “They have whatever symptoms. All of it is expanded by the general concern” over the coronavirus.


What sustains Rodriguez is the generosity of her colleagues. Doctors from various specialties far removed from internal medicine are calling to volunteer their services. It is humbling that in this time of desperate need there are so many warm hearts.

The clinic relies on the private good will of donors and philanthropy. To help, visit [www.rifreeclinic.org](http://www.rifreeclinic.org).

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