HEARING BEFORE THE BOARD OF ZONING ADJUSTMENT
May 14, 2002
9:30 a.m.

STATEMENT OF LA CLINICA DEL PUEBLO, INC.

Good morning Chairperson Griffis and Members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment. We are Dr. Juan Romagoza, Executive Director of La Clinica del Pueblo, Dr. Peter G. Shields, President of the Board of La Clinica and Enrique A. Cobham, La Clinica's Chief Administrator.

La Clinica del Pueblo, Inc. is a free medical clinic that has served the Latino community since 1983. The local community and the District government recognize us as an essential service.

Introduction and Summary

La Clinica is requesting that the Board grant a variance of the number of parking spaces required for a medical clinic in an R-5-B district. La Clinica has purchased a vacant building, formerly used as a warehouse, at 2831 15th Street, N.W., and plans to move its clinic there from its present location two blocks away at 1470 Irving Place, N.W., if the Board grants this application. The building at 2831 15th Street, N.W. is well located within the community that La Clinica serves, and it is the only building that we were able to find that would meet the needs of La Clinica and its patients. The Board previously granted this same variance to La Clinica on November 3, 1999 in response to La Clinica's original application. Unfortunately, La Clinica was unable to secure funding for the renovations required at its new site during the two years following approval of the variance and the variance has expired. Recently, $900,000 in financing was secured in the form of a grant from the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development for the construction work required at La Clinica's new site at 2831 15th Street, N.W. The funding of this grant is conditioned upon the receipt of the written opinion of the Board approving our Application and the satisfaction of a number of pre-construction requirements that can only be accomplished after the Board's approval is received. La Clinica has been given only a limited period of time to satisfy all of the conditions of its grant. In light of these additional requirements and time restraints, La Clinica respectfully requests that, upon approval of this Application, the Board issue a written opinion on an expedited basis.

As indicated in our Application, there is room on this property for no more than five parking spaces. The Zoning Regulations, however, specify one parking space for every 300 square feet of floor space, 11 DCMR § 2101.1, which would require 38 spaces for the 11,400 square feet in this building. We cannot possibly meet this requirement, and it would therefore be impossible for La Clinica to operate its clinic at this location unless the Board grants the variance that we request.

We believe that the variance that we request will not impose any substantial hardship or inconvenience on our neighbors. There are several reasons for this. First, La Clinica is already

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located in this neighborhood, and there are only three parking spaces at our present location; moving the clinic a two blocks away to 2831 15th Street, N.W. will not have any impact on parking in the neighborhood. Second, most of La Clinica's patients do not come to the clinic by car; they either live in the neighborhood and walk, or they come by bus. Third, with the Columbia Heights Metro station now opened, several of our staff members, who used to drive now use Metro (and we will continue to encourage our staff to do so). Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, we have reached agreement with the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1B whereby La Clinica has agreed to secure thirty off-site parking spaces to supplement the spaces at its new location.

Who is La Clinica Del Pueblo, Inc.?

La Clinica del Pueblo is a free medical clinic that provides primary care and subspecialty services, mostly to the Latino population. It was founded in 1982 by a coalition of North and Central Americans to address a lack of health care resources. La Clinica was a project of the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN), which focused on immigration and human rights. Our clinic started as a one evening, all volunteer clinic, caring for whomever was able to walk through our doors. Now, our hours of operation are 9 AM to 5 PM throughout the work week with additional clinic hours on Tuesday nights and Saturday mornings.

La Clinica continuously has been located at its present address at 1470 Irving St., N.W. We now plan to move to 2831 15th Street, NW.

We have provided care to the uninsured and underinsured. Recent data show that more than 30% of Latinos are uninsured. We have recently expanded our population by also accepting Medicaid patients, although not many Latinos have Medicaid. In addition, we are also participating with the D.C. Healthcare Alliance. Over the years we have cared for children and persons with cancer. We have helped people get hospitalized, operations, and dialysis. What was started as literally a one-room clinic at the Centro Comunal Unidad, formerly known as the Wilson Center, now occupies two full floors. Our clinic employs approximately 38 staff members and cares for approximately 3,500 patients per year on-site. Almost all of our staff is Latino, and most of our Board and volunteers are Latino too.

The official mission statement of La Clinica del Pueblo, Inc. is:

> "To provide free, culturally sensitive, and comprehensive health care and education services to the Latino community, and any others in need. La Clinica del Pueblo promotes community participation and empowerment through professional care, advocacy and a vision of health as a basic human right."

La Clinica is truly a collaborative effort between staff and volunteers, and Latinos and North Americans. We are a community-based organization attempting to address the major barriers to health care for low income Latinos. La Clinica provides more than 9,000 client-visits per year, which span primary care and specialty clinics, including adult primary care, pediatrics, adolescents, dermatology, rheumatology, neurology, AIDS, diabetes, reproductive health, occupational medicine, mental health, alternative medicine and others. Our educational services

include an active HIV outreach program, cultural sensitivity training to health professionals through interpretations and public media presentations. Among our programs is the Health Fair Project, where we provide health information and early detection services annually.

Why is La Clinica Needed?

Many of the adverse conditions that required us to go into business 19 years ago exist today. There are more than 250,000 Latinos in the metropolitan area; more than 30% are uninsured. Our client population at La Clinica is more than 90% Latino. Over one-half of our clients do not speak English, and many of them are illiterate. The mean years of education is 7.0. Only 10% of our clients have health insurance or receive entitlement benefits.

La Clinica's patients come because La Clinica is a small answer to the Latino's health needs. Latinos in the Washington, D.C. area

1) face a multitude of barriers to health care, some of which continue to worsen;
2) have a demographic profile that makes them particularly vulnerable to such barriers;
3) have a socioeconomic status that makes it impossible to address the barriers without support from other communities and governmental agencies; and
4) lack reachable health services and health education.

The inability to access affordable health care is the highest barrier to receiving health care. No matter how much we can improve access to health care, there will always be individuals who are not covered by entitlements such as Medicaid, are not provided insurance by their employers, and are unable to afford insurance as individuals. Some might have life savings in their bank or make a sufficient income to be ineligible for Medicaid. Traditionally, members of our Latino community are either not enrolled, not eligible due to documentation status, or over the income limits. Moreover, many Latinos do not apply for benefits because of the misconception that if they use entitlements, their documented residency status could be jeopardized.

Other barriers to health care include linguistic isolation, where hospitals and medical providers regularly lack interpreters. This makes it impossible to be adequately diagnosed, arrive at informed decisions regarding your care and be educated about the treatment you receive. But the lack of culturally appropriate care is not limited to linguistic reasons alone. There needs to be an understanding of the morals and mores, a heavy emphasis on spirituality, an understanding of traditional approaches to treating illness (i.e., many receive medicines from their own country and inadequately self-medicate themselves), and educated perceptions of health care providers. Many of these issues differ from country to country of Latin America, and even the spoken word may have vastly different meanings. In our model of free medical care, we provide services in an environment that is Latino, where culturally appropriate care is seamless, and the clients can feel "at home."

The health problems in the Latino community are complex, consisting of problems common to both lesser and more developed countries. They suffer from chronic parasitic

illnesses, nutritional problems, heart disease, and cancer. Importantly, such illnesses such as diabetes occur more commonly in Latinos than in African or Caucasian Americans. Thus, there is a great need for culturally appropriate Latino free medical services.

Recognizing the importance of La Clinica to the community, we regularly receive funding from the District of Columbia for HIV, mental health, housing and other services. In fact, the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development provided $300,000 and the Office Of Latino Affairs provided $15,000 for the purchase of the new building.

Moreover, within the past two years we received the Certificate of Need for our facility from the State Health Planning & Development Agency (SHPDA), Department of Health, Government of the District of Columbia permitting us to perform outpatient medical services and to serve as a stand alone mental health services provider.

We also enjoy the support of our community leaders. For example, Mayor Williams and Councilmember Graham attended our new building blessing ceremony. The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton, Councilmember Catania, and Councilmember Smith have visited our clinic several times, as has every Public Health Commissioner that DC has had since 1983. Thus, our community and the city need our clinic.

What Does La Clinica Need to Function Effectively?

Many of those adverse conditions we worked under 19 years ago still exist today. In our present building at 1470 Irving Place, N.W., we cannot install adequate air conditioning because of an inadequate electrical system. We have no elevator; some patients walk up 92 steps to get care, or they are carried. The electricity frequently goes off when we are seeing patients, particularly in the middle of the Summer and Winter. The heating is inadequate and we cannot examine patients with their clothes off in the wintertime. Our current square footage is approximately 7,500 square feet. We only are able to perform our services with difficulty, where examination rooms also exist as offices. Patients are sometimes counseled in non-private spaces. Even some patients are examined in the stairwells. Because our current space is limited, La Clinica has been closed to new patients for the last 12 months. At present, we do not have the physical capacity to serve the needs of the community.

Separately, we have had two architectural needs assessment. One was performed by Robert Schwartz and the other by Zell Partners. Independently, they determined that we need approximately 11,000 sq. feet to function effectively. We need about 10 examination rooms with sinks, a procedure room with a sink, a laboratory, a drugs dispensary, 5 counseling areas, group therapy rooms, a yoga classroom, confidential medical record areas and a waiting room. We also need one parking space for persons with disabilities, an elevator, air conditioning, heating, outside windows for counseling rooms and a space designed where the leadership can be accessible to the clients.

The new building design for 2831 15th Street, N.W., developed by Robert Schwartz, includes all these requirements, plus a large conference/training area and a chapel.

How Will The Community Around 2831 15th St., NW Benefit?

La Clinica has been a resident at 1470 Irving Street NW for 19 years. We have been a good neighbor and have had no complaints. In fact, we have helped in the neighborhood with stability and security. At times, we have hired security guards to watch the community, when it seemed needed. We enjoy excellent relations with the local police authorities and are looked upon by them to assist with peaceful efforts.

We expect that our move to the new facility, less than 3 blocks away, will not change any of our good neighborly relations. Many of our staff, board and volunteers are homeowners in the District and support the rights, convenience and peace of homeowners.

Upon moving, we do not expect to substantially increase the quantity of our services. Our current plans are to improve the quality of our services and to increase the educational opportunities to medical professionals (i.e., increasing the level of partnership with Howard University). The size of the new facility is matched to what we can afford, and to what is the current size needs of our programs.

The location at 2831 15th Street has been vacant and boarded for almost 6 years. We will bring life and safety to the facility. We did not beat out any other potential buyers and in fact, there were none at the time the property was acquired. The previous use of the facility was a warehouse, where large trucks made frequent deliveries. This will not happen with La Clinica as an occupant. We do not do acute care, so we do not have patients come in ambulances, there are no sirens or loud activities and the only supplies we receive is periodic office and medical supplies. Our medical waste, stored inside, is disposed of legally by a private contractor.

La Clinica and its members are recognized as community leaders. The Executive Director, Dr. Juan Romagoza, is a physician trained in El Salvador and is one of the few individuals from that country who had been granted political asylum in this country because he has physical evidence of having been tortured. He has been at La Clinica for more than eleven years and is a District resident. Dr. Romagoza received the prestigious Robert Wood Johnson Community Health Leadership Award and The National Council of La Raza's Human Rights Award. Dr. Romagoza is also active in government service and is currently a member of the Health Reform Commission and the Mayor's Health Policy Council.

Dr. Shields is a full professor of Medicine and Oncology at Georgetown University. He is also the Associate Director for Cancer Control at the Lombardi Cancer Center. He is a District resident who is actively involved in many community activities. For example, he is a member of the DC Board of Medicine. Dr. Shields has been serving La Clinica and the community for almost 20 years.

Mr. Enrique Cobham is La Clinica's Chief Administrator. He is also a District resident. Mr. Cobham is an MBA graduate of Howard University and a Certified Healthcare Executive of the American College of Healthcare Executives, with over 20 years of experience in healthcare management.

Thus, these individuals have a long history of serving the particular community where La Clinica is located and needs to continue to operate from that area.

Why Does La Clinica Need The Space At 2831 15th Street, NW?

La Clinica searched for an adequate facility for more than 3 years before finding this site. Several of our funding sources have threatened to cut our funding unless we provide appropriate access for persons with disabilities, which will be available at the new site, and our Certificate of Need that allows us to bill for Medicaid services is conditioned on our moving to an appropriate facility.

La Clinica primarily serves the Latino community. Thus, it is imperative that we remain located in our present neighborhood. Most of our clients come to La Clinica by foot, bus or Metro. We view the Columbia Heights Metro station, 3 blocks away, as an important way for clients and staff to come to La Clinica.

We recognize that the available parking on site, namely five spaces including one for access for persons with disabilities, is suboptimal. Had we been able to find a site with more parking, we would have opted for this. We recognize that this would have been convenient for patients and staff. However, it is more important that our facility is located in the community we serve, and buildings with adequate parking were not to be found.

How Will La Clinica Affect The Parking Around 2832 15th Street NW.?

We do not anticipate an adverse impact on parking within the neighborhood. Importantly, we already are in the neighborhood so there will not be a net increase in parking needs. Second, we expect that there will continue to be less parking needs at La Clinica as both staff and clients make greater use of the Metro.

As part of our original application, we performed a survey of how our staff and clients travel to La Clinica. That survey indicated that only 28% of our clients come by car, more than 29% live in the neighborhood and walk, and the remainder take the bus. The numbers of persons who said that they would take the Metro, when the new station opened, was 41%. We believe that since this survey was completed fewer clients and staff are driving to La Clinica.

We also believe that our survey of the 15th street area around our building remains accurate. That survey was made by observing the parking in the morning and the afternoon over two weeks, on 15th Street itself, between Euclid and Columbia Road. That survey found at least 7 available spaces and as many as 14. It should be remembered that this is on top of the fact that La Clinica is already in the neighborhood and some of our staff and clients already park on 15th street (about 26%). Based upon our observations since the survey was completed we believe that these numbers remain accurate.

Finally, La Clinica has met on numerous occasions with its neighbors and Neighborhood Advisory Commission 1B and has agreed to supplement the five spaces available at the 15th Street site with thirty additional off-site spaces. La Clinica is currently negotiating for off-site

parking with the owners of the Columbia Heights Village Apartments and Unity Health Care, Inc.

Therefore, we believe that the impact on our neighbors regarding parking as a result of the relocation of La Clinica from Irving Street to 15th Street will be minimal.

Conclusion

La Clinica del Pueblo, Inc. is a free medical clinic that has served the Latino community since 1982. The local community and the District government recognize us as an essential service. Our current location is clearly inadequate for us to fulfill our mission and to serve the community.

We have identified a suitable new home for La Clinica. It is a boarded-up building that has been vacant for about six years. Our use of the building will be a great improvement over its current deteriorating condition and its previous use. We currently have a record of being a good neighbor, and becoming an owner-occupant at our new location will ensure that we continue to be a good neighbor and support the neighborhood. While we recognize that some of our immediate neighbors may be concerned about inconvenience in finding on-street parking, we believe that such inconvenience, if any, will be minimal. Overall, the new La Clinica building will be an asset to the neighborhood. The improvement that La Clinica will bring to the neighborhood and the need for our services in that community, will far outweigh any inconveniences regarding parking.

Thank you for your consideration.