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## Times are tough for Grand Prairie Wellness Center and its patients

12:00 AM CST on Saturday, January 31, 2009

When **Robert Martínez** moved to Texas from California, he fully expected his new company to offer health insurance. He was wrong.

Martínez, a Grand Prairie sales executive for a scale company, says his firm is too small to offer health benefits to any of its employees.

When he went looking for a health insurer later, he discovered to his dismay that the premiums were beyond his reach – the 32-year-old father of five is diabetic and considered high-risk by most health insurance companies.

Estimates ran from \$800 to \$1,200 a month for coverage, with some deductibles as high as \$20,000, he said.

Then he found the Grand Prairie Wellness Center, a 7-year-old clinic in one of the poorest and medically underserved areas of Dallas County.

And even though it's been a humbling experience at times to go and get his blood work done there, he has no other options.

"What can one person do?" he said. "If I didn't need any help, I wouldn't be there."

As the U.S. economy shrinks, corporate budgets tighten and layoffs increase, health care is becoming a crucial issue for both poor and middle-class families such as Martínez's.

And as nonprofit organizations feel the squeeze from reduced donations, the Wellness Center also faces a critical period in the coming months, said **Chuck Poffenbarger**, board president of the clinic.

The clinic's budget has been kept to \$225,000 for 2009, in spite of a projected 42 percent increase in the number of patient visits over last year. In 2008, the clinic's part-time medical staff served more than 2,000 patients in 5,000 visits.

"It's going to be a struggle," Poffenbarger said, "but it's a bigger struggle for many of our patients, who can't afford health care."

It's a vicious cycle for low-income families with no medical insurance.

"When you're sick, you stay sick – it's one of the main characteristics of poverty," Poffenbarger said.

The average family being served by the clinic earns only \$12,000-\$18,000 a year, and 85 percent of the patients are Hispanic.

Many of them have trouble finding a job because of their health conditions, said **Tencha Rodríguez**, executive director of the clinic.

"So we really try to treat the whole person and stabilize their condition," she said. "Our goal is to get them to where they don't need us anymore and can become productive citizens."

Increasingly, though, the recession is driving more middle-income families to the clinic's free health care.

"Lately we are seeing more and more clients who have recently lost their jobs and are struggling to make their house and utility payments," Rodríguez said. "I just had a lady in this morning whose husband got laid off because his company is cutting back on costs and his entire department has been cut.

"This gentleman had been at his job for 12 years, and now he is without a job, and his unemployment compensation has run out and he can't find another job."