Every Wednesday afternoon, University of Alabama student volunteers arrive at the McDonald Hughes Community Center in west Tuscaloosa and convert a portion of the building into a temporary medical center. They are a part of the West End Health Project, a health-monitoring and education clinic conceived, developed and now operated by students in partnership with two service-learning courses and multiple campus and community organizations.

Vel Lewis, Patrick Crowley, Will Gonzalez, Mary Sellers Shaw and Paul Strickland, students from UA’s Blackburn Institute, a selective leadership program that gathers students committed to community improvement, came up with the idea for the clinic after being challenged to create a project that would positively impact Tuscaloosa or surrounding counties. Health care is difficult to access for many residents of West End, an impoverished and medically underserved area of Tuscaloosa. Students used a $2,500 grant from The Daniel Foundation of Alabama and funding from the Blackburn Institute to establish a health clinic at the McDonald Hughes Community Center, located in the heart of the area.

Since the clinic opened in Fall 2014, the student-volunteer staff has grown to 20 to 25. Volunteers include members of the UH 400 Medicine and Community course and students in the UH 120 Diabetes and Obesity: An American Epidemic class. Medical doctors who are part of UA’s College of Community Health Sciences faculty also volunteer on site each week.

“We helped to create the West End Health Project due to the need of a free hypertension and diabetes screening clinic in our community,” says Caitlin Buggert, a junior majoring in biology who was part of the yearlong Medicine and Community course during the 2014-15 academic year. “Oftentimes, a person does not have the funds for regular doctor visits, so their diabetes or hypertension goes unnoticed. With the start of this clinic, our hope is to educate and connect with the people of Tuscaloosa about their health.”

To prepare for working in the West End clinic, Medicine and Community students — who are preparing for careers in health fields — learn to check blood-pressure and blood-sugar levels, provide health education and conduct motivational interviews. Students in this course also serve at the Sowing Seeds of Hope Hypertension Clinic in Marion, a community in Alabama’s rural, medically underserved Black Belt. West End Health also uses a lecture portion of the course, physicians representing different fields of medicine speak to the class. The UH 120 Diabetes and Obesity class works in collaboration with the Diabetes Education Team, or DIET, an initiative founded and run by UA students that educates the West Alabama community about diabetes and provides information and tools to those who suffer from the disease. Students learn the basics of type 2 diabetes and how to lead education sessions on lifestyle habits such as diet and exercise that can help people manage the disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 11 percent of Alabamians have been diagnosed with diabetes, and that number is steadily rising even as national numbers level out. Nationally, Alabama ranks third for the percentage of residents diagnosed with diabetes, according to the CDC.

At the clinic, Medicine and Community students perform health screenings, and DIET students counsel patients who have diabetes or pre-diabetes. Every Wednesday the clinic is open from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Students arrive early to hang banners and set up tables and monitoring stations. During the screening process, students measure height and weight, waist circumference, blood glucose and blood pressure. After adding this information to the patient’s chart and calculating his or her body mass index, a Medicine and Community student and DIET student review the results with the patient. “They discuss any abnormalities and simple steps that can be taken to improve upon any numbers that are out of sync,” says Alex Morris, one of the clinic’s student directors and the president of DIET.

When screenings detect problems, students also connect patients with low-cost or free health-care providers for treatment and encourage them to return the following week to check their progress.

Buggert says the Medicine and Community course and related service projects are great assets to a pre-medical student’s undergraduate career because they teach patient-care skills and give students hands-on experience.

“Medicine and Community provides an excellent opportunity for pre-med students at Alabama to reach out to the communities around us and give back,” she says. “Although one might say we are helping the communities of West Alabama, I believe that the community is really helping us.”

Dr. Pamela Payne-Foster, a UA faculty physician and deputy director of the UA Rural Health Institute, agrees. Payne-Foster volunteers with UA students at the West End Health Clinic and says the experience is as beneficial for the students as it is for the patients. “The majority of students are from upper-middle-class backgrounds and have no idea of the poverty that is related to health,” says Payne-Foster. “Studying medicine usually focuses on clinical skills. These students are learning that communication skills with a patient are just as important.”

Building relationships with patients is something students have been working on since the clinic opened. On the first day, a patient came into the clinic with abnormally high blood pressure. “He told us about how hard it was [to exercise and eat right] because of his job, which requires him to sit behind the wheel of a truck for most of the day,” says Morris, a senior majoring in music performance. “He promised us he would try.” After that, the patient returned each week. His blood pressure dropped to a safe range, and he has lost 10 pounds. Morris says the man told students he feels better and wants to lose even more weight.

“Having the students talk to him every week has helped him make dramatic changes,” Payne-Foster says.

Student director of the clinic hopes it will grow into a mobile facility as well, with a bus that could bring patients to the clinic or bring the clinic to them. Having a dedicated building is another long-term goal. Andrew Davis, a student director and junior majoring in biology, says the West End Health Project has nearly boundless potential. “I think that WEHP will be a place that anyone in the West End, or Tuscaloosa in general, can go and feel comfortable talking about their health and ways they might improve it,” he says.

WEHP is a collaboration of multiple community partners and UA organizations including Housers College, University Medical Center, the Saving Lives Initiative, the Blackburn Institute and DIET. For more information about the UH 400 Medicine and Community course, contact Dr. Jennifer Clem at jclenm@bama.ua.edu. For more information about UH 120 Diabetes and Obesity, contact Dr. Pamela Payne-Foster at ppayne-foster@ehcs.ua.edu or 205-348-0077. For more information about the UH 400 Medicine and Community course, contact Dr. Jennifer Clem at jclenm@bama.ua.edu. For more information about UH 120 Diabetes and Obesity, contact Dr. Pamela Payne-Foster at ppayne-foster@ehcs.ua.edu or 205-348-0077.