

Musician's Health Clinic on Life Support after Funds Cut

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by **Richard A. Webster**
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For years *Antoinette K-Doe* tried to convince her husband, legendary New Orleans musician *Ernie K-Doe*, to see a doctor. He always came back with the same answer: "No." Like most musicians, K-Doe was tough and never believed he was going to get sick. Besides, he could not afford to carry health insurance on a musician's paycheck. Then in 1998, Antoinette heard about the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic**, which offered health care to local musicians. She told her husband he could set a positive example for all New Orleans musicians in need of medical care by getting a physical. That did the trick. Ernie went to the clinic and got his physical.

"When he went in, they found out a lot was wrong with him," Antoinette said. **"Ernie died three years later but the clinic most definitely extended his life. They went overboard trying to help us and if it weren't for them, I would still be paying medical bills. After that a lot of musicians started going in."**

Antoinette's now worried about the budget crunch endangering the clinic's ability to continue its mission to help ailing musicians. Clinic co-founder *Bethany Bultman* has applied for a two-year, \$180,000 Edward Wisner Donation grant administered by the city. The money would help continue the clinic's basic dental care program, create a diabetic maintenance program and subsidize the prescription program. If the request is denied, Bultman said the clinic will have to cut back on services. City officials did not return repeated phone calls for comment on the grant.

"People don't have a concept of how much it costs to pay for (basic) dental care or medications or diabetic care for a year," Bultman said. "When I came into this as a journalist, I was so sick of writing about musicians dying in the emergency rooms from preventative diseases. That's why the clinic was established, to help the minds, bodies and souls of the great musicians of New Orleans. But without the necessary funding, it gets real hard to fulfill that mission." Founded in 1998, the **New Orleans Musicians' Clinic** is a nonprofit, nonemergency facility that provides healthcare to professional musicians and their families. It's the only such facility in the country. In the past four years the clinic's patient base swelled from 200 to more than 1,000

musicians and its budget doubled from \$500,000 to \$1 million. Most of its operating budget comes in the form of volunteer health care, equipment and discounted pharmaceuticals from the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center and the Daughters of Charity Health Services of New Orleans. In recent years, however, cash donations to the clinic have slipped. In 2002, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation, an original clinic sponsor, cut off its annual donation of \$50,000. Last year alone, the clinic spent \$31,000 providing 1,351 prescriptions to local musicians. New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation President *David Oestreicher* said a decrease in tourism following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and poor attendance at last year's rainy Jazz Fest forced the foundation to cut spending more than \$100,000. He would like to resume funding the clinic but said no new funds will be committed until a new agreement to produce Jazz Fest is completed. Musicians represent a high-risk population, said *Dr. Cathi Fontenot*, director of the clinic. They are prone to hearing loss, carpal tunnel syndrome, dental concerns and back problems. But being self-employed and earning chronically low wages, which can amount to no more than a few hundred dollars a month means most can not afford health insurance. **"If the Occupational Safety and Health Administration had any jurisdiction over the work environment of musicians, especially in New Orleans, they would shut it down,"** Bultman said. **"They play in the most unbelievably harmful environments."** Bandleader *Walter Payton*, who lost his health insurance after retiring from New Orleans Public Schools after 25 years, said the clinic helped him get a hip replacement and manage his diabetes and congestive heart failure. "Without the clinic I would be dead. It's that simple," he said. "For musicians, I don't know if there is another option besides the clinic and I'm glad I didn't have to find out." +

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Antoinette K-Doe, with a life-size replica of her late husband, musician Ernie K-Doe, said the New Orleans Musicians' Clinic extended his life by providing him with medical care he couldn't otherwise afford.

New Orleans Musicians' Clinic

Founded: 1998

Annual budget: \$1 million

Patient base: More than 1000 musicians

Services: comprehensive, preventative medical care for professional musicians and their families

Partners: Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, Daughters of Charity Health Services of New Orleans