

## St. Mary's Legacy Clinic helps East Tenn.

RV clinic ensures that 'they come away loved'

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Standing next to a 40 foot long, custom- built RV mobile medical clinic, Sister Mariana Koonce, RSM, knows what it means to find your life's passion. She's been following it her whole life.

Growing up in Western Kentucky, Koonce knew since the 4th grade that she wanted to be a physician, so she could help those less fortunate.

"One of the reasons for being a doctor was to serve and to help people with their health, and it always seemed, what better way to help people than to help them with their health?" Koonce said.

Which is exactly what Koonce, executive director and main physician of St. Mary's Legacy Clinic, does as she drives around East Tennessee to areas like Crab Orchard, Athens and Gatlinburg, where the clinic has been part of the recovery process after the 2016 fires scorched the area.

"We know we can't do everything that a fixed clinic or hospital can do, but what we do do is we want to be able to provide quality services," Koonce said. "So (we) focus our care for the areas we can do well — blood pressure management, diabetes management, life style changes, you know, really engaging with our patients."

Although Koonce had a clear sight of what she wanted to do, she didn't know exactly where her dream would take her.

### Clear sight, but a winding path

Koonce started in medicine at the University of Notre Dame, where she earned her pre-med degree and continued on to Tulane University School of Medicine for her medical degree.

Koonce received her medical training while serving in the Navy, where she spent seven and a half years and got training that would help her run the mobile clinic.

their visits either on their website or through Facebook posts on their page.

For Koonce, it's all about the successes that she can help with granted the limited resources.

One patient who had an amputated leg dreamed of getting a prosthetic. While Koonce couldn't directly help with the prosthetic, she did what she could to help heal the wound and connect the patient with Limbs for Life. After not seeing the patient for a few months, he surprised her by walking in one day with a new prosthetic leg.

"We take the time to really talk to them and get to know them," Koonce said. "They see us as family. We have long term patients that have been coming to us, some of them for five years now. They rely on us, they know we're coming. We have a predictable schedule and that's important in some of those rural areas."

Koonce explained how the patients who visit the clinic often face several challenges: She said many are underemployed or unemployed, they don't have health insurance, their educational backgrounds might not be the best and now they have health issues on top of everything else.

Kathy Buckingham, president of the board for St. Mary's Legacy Clinic, has had extensive healthcare background and always worked hard to make sure that people without insurance were taken care of.

"It is a hard thing to do. With reimbursement going down, doctor's and hospitals don't have quite the flexibility. So I had sort of envisioned something like this, so I was so excited when it came about," Buckingham said, pointing to the mobile clinic around her.

"We do our best to manage their medical situations given the limited resources," Koonce said. "But, if nothing else, they come away loved, knowing that there are people that care about them. And that's what we do."

“In retrospect, ship work makes great preparation for running a mobile clinic,” Koonce said laughing at the thought. “You already had to learn to work in small spaces, make do with what you have. You know, you don’t always have all the resources available at your disposal.”

After serving, Koonce went into private practice in Eastern Washington state for about six years.

“I did everything that I wanted to do first, and then I got around to asking God what he wanted,” Koonce said. “And He directed me towards the Sisters of Mercy, so I entered the religious order in 2008.”

Koonce arrived in Knoxville in 2012, with the mission of starting the mobile clinic that started seeing patients in 2014.

### **Serving the communities of East Tennessee**

Walking into the mobile clinic, the sanitized cleanliness smell that usually emanates throughout hospitals washes over you.

The RV is equipped with slide-outs to make the clinic larger. In the center section, as you walk into a wide interior, a skylight resembling the sky shines down calming blues and greens.

On either end of the truck there are private exam rooms for patients, with the end room also having easy access for those in wheelchairs.

“We have a powered exam table which can go all the way down to the floor,” Koonce said. “So again people with limited mobility can transfer from their wheelchair onto here.”

The space is also used as a procedure room so Koonce can perform minor procedures like mole removals and minor suturing.

The clinic offers other services including joint injections, EKGs, reading tests, a nursing area, some on-board lab tests and blood drawings to bring to Knoxville, where LabCorp runs the tests and patient education.

“We’re trying to expand the services we’re able to offer on board. We’re trying to decide how we grow,” Koonce said as she listed either adding more sites to visit, increasing the number of patients they can see, adding additional services like a portable ultrasound or bringing on people who can provide services.



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**Sister Mariana Koonce inside the St. Mary’s Legacy mobile clinic parked at the Church of Divine Mercy in Knoxville on July 17.** BRIANNA PACIORKA/NEWS SENTINEL

## St. Mary's Clinic keeps communities informed about