



Making a Difference One Night at a Time: An Annual Fundraiser for a Student-Run Free Clinic Raises Over \$25,000

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Abstract

Introduction: The Lighthouse Free Medical Clinic (LFMC) is a student-run clinic (SRC) in Buffalo, NY, providing free healthcare to uninsured and underserved patients. The LFMC relies primarily on community fundraising events for financial support, with the Annual Winter Gala serving as its main source of funding. In February 2023, the Gala successfully raised over \$25,000.00 in profit, surpassing previous records by adopting several new fundraising strategies. These funds will significantly exceed the clinic's annual operating budget, enabling the expansion of patient services and the continued delivery of high-quality healthcare.

Planning & Night of Gala: The student leaders of the LFMC meticulously planned the Gala, which involved soliciting donations from local businesses for basket raffles, organizing entertainment during the cocktail hour, and arranging a live auction featuring items donated by community members.

Gala Impact: The 2023 Gala attracted 376 guests and generated a profit of \$25,973.40. The event featured 47 basket raffles and 21 live auction donations. The resulting profit will be allocated to various expenses of the LFMC's operations, including laboratory supplies, outsourced laboratory procedures, provider insurance policies, a food delivery initiative, patient transportation services, miscellaneous costs, and the expansion of future clinic initiatives.

Conclusion: This descriptive report details the planning, implementation, and future directions of the Gala fundraising event. It serves as a valuable template for other SRCs across the nation, offering guidance on funding strategies to support their clinic operations.

Introduction

Student-run clinics (SRCs) play a vital role in mitigating health disparities in underserved communities. However, independent clinics often receive minimal or no state and federal funds, instead relying on donations, grants, and fundraising efforts for financial support.^{1,2} For example, clinics like the Shade Tree Clinic in Tennessee and the Clínica Esperanza/Hope Clinic in Rhode Island depend on fundraisers and grants.^{3,4} Other

clinics, including the University of Arizona College of Medicine-Tucson TotShots Clinic and the BRIDGE Clinic at the University of South Florida, receive funding through private donations.^{5,6} Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics estimated that free SRCs nationwide saw a 40.00% decrease in donations.⁷ This financially hampers the ability of SRCs to expand their services, despite the increasing number of uninsured Americans, the burden of chronic care, and the need for specialty

care.^{8,9} While community needs assessments have been shown to attract financial support from academic institutions and grantors, there is limited research identifying effective funding strategies for SRCs.¹⁰

The Lighthouse Free Medical Clinic (LFMC) is a 501(c)(3) SRC founded in 2001 by medical students from the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at the University at Buffalo who identified the need for accessible healthcare in Buffalo, NY. Over the past 22 years, the LFMC has remained committed to providing free healthcare to uninsured and underserved patients in Buffalo while addressing barriers to healthy living (see online appendix A for the LFMC mission). Operating every Friday night, the LFMC offers several medical services, including physical exams, sick visits, Tuberculin skin tests, and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing. In addition, the LFMC holds a bi-monthly gynecology or dermatology clinic. All services are available to any clinic visitor, regardless of their insurance or residency status.

The LFMC primarily relies on contributions raised during annual fundraisers to fund its services, as the clinic operates with a volunteer staff. The main LFMC fundraiser is the Annual Winter Gala, which is open to the entire local community and consistently raises more funds than the clinic's annual budget. This profit allows for the expansion of services offered by the LFMC each year. In 2023, various initiatives were implemented to improve the Gala, leading to the successful fundraising effort that raised over \$25,000.00, marking the highest amount to date.

This descriptive report aims to address fundraising gaps in the SRC literature by providing a detailed illustration of the LFMC Gala fundraising event and its impact on clinic operations and services offered. This fundraiser description serves as a valuable guide for student leaders of SRCs to improve their fundraising potential and ensure continued support for the essential services they provide to their patients.

Gala Planning

In this section, we provide a comprehensive overview of the planning process for the 2023 Annual Gala fundraiser.

Event Space Selection

Eight months prior to the Gala, an extensive search was conducted to identify suitable event spaces in the Buffalo area. Purposeful efforts were made to ensure that the chosen venue not only comfortably accommodated the desired number of guests but also boasted an expanded capacity, achieved by deliberately selecting a larger venue. This strategic decision was made with the explicit goal of facilitating a greater number of attendees, thereby enhancing our fundraising potential. The chosen venue not only offered the best price-value ratio but also provided ample space for the planned events. This change was necessary as the previous Gala venue had a capacity of only 300 guests, and our goal for the 2023 Gala was to host more than 300 attendees.

Donation Solicitation

Four months before the Gala, donation solicitation began. The primary focus was to engage local small businesses and Black-owned businesses to help raise their visibility in Buffalo. To streamline the local donation collection process, a "donation day adventure" was introduced for the first time. The 34 LFMC student managers were divided into 17 teams of 2 for the event. Each team visited assigned locations with high business density, such as restaurants, flower shops, and exercise facilities, to secure donations from a goal of at least eight businesses. A comprehensive donation package was provided to each LFMC student manager team to facilitate the solicitation process, including a solicitation letter, the Gala brochure, and the LFMC 501(c)(3) certification letter. These items highlighted the LFMC and Gala's impact on community healthcare (see solicitation letter template in online appendix B). Monetary donations, as well as physical items or services, were welcomed contributions. All local businesses that were visited in person during the "donation day adventure" or contacted via other forms were followed up within the following weeks to secure item donations.

As part of the clinic's commitment to diversity and inclusion, each LFMC manager contacted and solicited donations from three assigned Black-owned businesses using published lists from local news websites. This initiative was

Table 1. Tiered sponsorship program for monetary Gala donations – *Monetary donation tiers with their corresponding donation amount and advertising package.*

| Sponsorship tier name | Monetary donation amount, \$ | Advertising package | Number purchased, n |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| Diamond | 1,500.00 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage on auction stage • Spoken recognition during the live auction • Signage on bars at the Gala • 2 complimentary gala tickets | 6 |
| Gold | 1,000.00 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoken recognition during the live auction • Signage on bars at the Gala • 2 complimentary gala tickets | 3 |
| Bronze | 500.00 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage on bars at the Gala | 5 |
| Table sponsor | 100.00 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage on one Gala dining table | 23 |

All tier donors will be recognized on the LFMC Instagram and website for one year, as well as in the Gala program.

LFMC: Lighthouse Free Medical Clinic.

introduced for the 2023 Gala and aimed to strengthen clinic relationships with the Black-owned business community of Buffalo.

Sponsorship and Advertising

To encourage monetary donations to the Gala, a tiered sponsorship program was implemented (Table 1). This program offered various levels of recognition and benefits based on the donation amount contributed. There were four tiers in total, including Table, Bronze, Gold, and Diamond Sponsors, providing different advertising opportunities in the Gala program, at the Gala event, as well as on the LFMC's Instagram and website for one year. Similarly, contributors of all Gala item donations, referred to as “property donations,” were featured on LFMC online platforms and the Gala program to recognize their support and generosity.

Ticket Sales

Gala ticket sales started three weeks before the event. Students enjoyed discounted prices (\$50.00 versus \$65.00 for full-priced tickets) to boost their participation. During ticket purchase, guests indicated their Gala meal preference. Additionally, two LFMC student managers went door-to-door to medical school faculty members' offices, personally inviting them to attend and donate to the Gala. Those not present in their offices at the time of the visit were contacted via email. Gratitude was expressed to 20 Gala sponsorship purchasers as part of their sponsorship

package offerings, with complimentary tickets to the event. Ticket sales concluded one week prior to the Gala, allowing ample time for venue preparation.

Basket Raffle and Live Auction Preparation

To enhance fundraising and offer exciting opportunities to Gala attendees, a basket raffle was organized with property donations. LFMC managers worked together to categorize the donations and create themed baskets using cost-effective second-hand woven baskets (see online appendix C for basket raffle descriptions). Additionally, the LFMC's Fundraising Coordinator contacted previous Gala donors, medical school faculty, and community members for live auction donations. Exclusive experiences such as date nights, outings with medical school faculty members, sporting tickets, cabin rentals, and boat tours were secured (see online appendix D for live auction item descriptions).

Program Design

A comprehensive program was created for Gala attendees. The program included important event information and engaging content, such as the LFMC mission, the Gala event schedule, a list of auction prizes, recognition of award recipients, as well as thank-you messages to Gala donors, sponsors, LFMC staff, and volunteers. Additionally, photos showcasing all contributing businesses' logos were included to encourage community partnership.

The Night of The Gala

The Gala followed a well-organized schedule that unfolded as follows. From 6:00 to 7:30 PM, guests enjoyed a cocktail hour with games, open bars, and basket raffles. Subsequently, from 7:30 to 8:30 PM, attendees were served dinner while the games, open bars, and basket raffles continued. The live events segment began at 8:30 PM and extended until 10:00 PM, featuring a welcome speech, an awards presentation, and a live auction.

Cocktail Hour

The Gala cocktail hour created a welcoming atmosphere for networking and socializing. Three open bars offered access to a variety of refreshing beverages. Basket raffles added excitement and fundraising opportunities, enabling attendees to purchase raffle tickets and place them in designated bins for desired baskets. One dedicated clinic volunteer served as the event's DJ, playing music throughout the evening. To entertain and engage guests, various games were offered, including basketball, roulette, Beirut, Plinko, darts, mini golf, and cornhole. All of these games were handmade by previous LFMC managers and were therefore zero-cost to the 2023 Gala. Each game required a \$5.00 entry fee. Participants who did not win received five raffle tickets valued at \$1.00 each. Game winners had the chance to earn additional raffle tickets, receiving either five or ten more tickets depending on the game played. LFMC managers supervised each game, ensuring smooth operation and an enjoyable experience for all.

Award Ceremony and Live Auction

After dinner was served, the live events began with a welcome speech from the LFMC Fundraising Coordinator. Awards were presented, including Distinguished Service awards for exceptional medical student clinic volunteers, a Distinguished Educator award for the clinic's medical advisor, and the Distinguished Allied Health Member award to recognize the dedicated work of one Allied Health LFMC staff member. The awards ceremony concluded with the presentation of the Distinguished Lighthouse Provider Award, recognizing a committed medical

professional volunteer who embodies the LFMC's core values.

The live auction, conducted by a beloved medical school faculty member, followed. Attendees used numbered signs to place bids on auctioned items and contribute to the LFMC fundraising goals. Strategic intermissions were incorporated to announce basket raffle winners during the live auction.

Post-Gala Initiatives

In the weeks following the 2023 Annual Winter Gala, individualized thank-you notes were sent via email to express gratitude to all donors (see online appendix E for a thank-you note template). Additionally, the LFMC Fundraising Coordinator contacted and connected each live auction winner with the donor of their winning item. The goal of these post-Gala efforts was to maintain strong relationships with all donors and facilitate their continued engagement with the LFMC's mission.

Gala Impact

The 2023 Gala experienced a significant turnout, with a total of 376 guests in attendance. Of the attendees, 209 (55.59%) were Jacobs School of Medicine students, 81 (21.54%) were guests of medical students, and 86 (22.87%) were either Jacobs School of Medicine faculty or faculty guests. This marked the largest number of guests and the largest number of medical school faculty to attend the Gala in its history.

A total of 286 businesses and individual donors were contacted for donations, with 123 (43.01%) participating in the Gala as item or monetary donors. The local community demonstrated strong support by contributing over 100 property donations to basket raffles and the live auction. The basket raffle featured 47 curated baskets, each valued at approximately \$100.00 (refer to Appendix C for details). The live auction showcased 21 property donations, all exceeding \$100.00 in value (refer to online appendix D for the list of items). Additionally, 44 individuals made monetary contributions, with the highest-value donations coming from local medical groups and specialty medical departments. Table 2 provides a summary of all donation data.

Table 2. Summary of donation data from the 2023 Annual Winter Gala – Total number of property donations and monetary donations.

| Donation type | Donations received, n |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Property donations | 121* |
| Basket raffle | 100* |
| Live auction | 21 |
| Monetary donations | 44 |

*These donation numbers are approximate because some donors contributed a 'single' donation with multiple items that were divided among multiple baskets.

Table 3. 2023 Annual Winter Gala financial data – Gala income statement.

| Designation | Amount, \$ |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| Revenues | |
| Ticket sales* | 18,710.00 |
| Monetary donations | 18,660.00 |
| Basket raffle tickets | 3,913.00 |
| Live auction | 13,745.00 |
| Total revenue | 55,028.00 |
| Expenses | |
| Event space | 28,854.60 |
| Event supplies | 200.00 |
| Total expenses | 29,054.60 |
| Profit | 25,973.40 |

*Tickets cost \$65.00 for all non-medical students and \$50.00 for medical students.

The 2023 Annual Winter Gala generated a total revenue of \$55,028.00, while the total expenses amounted to \$29,054.60, resulting in a profit of \$25,973.40. The expenses included \$28,854.60 for renting the event space and \$200.00 for purchasing Gala supplies, such as table stands, basket raffle materials, and raffle tickets. The revenue comprised \$18,710.00 from ticket sales, \$18,660.00 from monetary donations, \$13,745.00 from live auction winners, and \$3,913.00 from game participation. Detailed financial data can be found in Table 3.

This profit is used to support the clinic's operations and expand services for LPMC patients. Between the 2022 and 2023 Annual Winter Galas, the clinic incurred expenses as follows: \$3,536.00 on clinic laboratory supplies (e.g., blood collection supplies, gloves, urine collection supplies),

\$2,315.34 on outsourced laboratory procedures that cannot be run in-house (e.g., comprehensive metabolic panels, nucleic acid amplification testing), \$2,112.00 on provider insurance policies, \$2,298.00 on technology subscriptions used in clinic (e.g., electronic medical record, faxing service, Google Workspace subscription), \$1,400.00 on patient transportation services, \$700.00 on free food delivery services, and approximately \$3,600.00 on miscellaneous costs (e.g., research costs, office supplies, laptops). In total, these expenses amounted to \$15,961.34, which was well below the amount raised at the 2023 Gala alone.

Conclusion

This descriptive report provides a comprehensive summary of a highly successful fundraising event organized by a free SRC, which generated a record-breaking profit of over \$25,000.00 that surpasses the average profit of approximately \$20,000 from previous years' Galas.

In the limited literature on funding methods for free clinics, some clinics have shared their approaches. For instance, SRCs like Texas Tech University's clinic rely solely on grant funding (e.g., National Breast Cancer Foundation grant and Stern Foundation). On the other hand, the Morehouse School of Medicine SRC in Georgia receives funding through faculty and alumni donations, grants, website donations, and support from their medical school.^{11,12} The Tulane Student-Run Tuberculosis (TB) Program collaborates with a state-funded TB clinic for testing and treatment, while the Infectious Disease Elimination Act Clinic in Miami is entirely funded by the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine's Department of Community Service.^{13,14} Although published studies offer valuable insights, they lack guidance on implementing or enhancing funding methods for SRCs. Therefore, our report is the first to present a detailed analysis of a fundraising event that can be applied to any SRC.

Over the years, the LPMC Annual Winter Gala has undergone modifications to increase community support for the clinic. For the 2023 Gala, four specific initiatives were implemented to enhance attendance and financial outcomes. Firstly, a larger venue was intentionally selected to accommodate more guests, increasing

fundraising potential. Secondly, two LFMC student managers adopted a personalized approach, extending individual invitations to medical school faculty members through door-to-door visits to their offices, with the aim of boosting their attendance and contributions. Given the historically low attendance of faculty members in past years, this targeted outreach addressed an underrepresented population. Thirdly, a novel "donation day adventure" was introduced to streamline local donation collection. Lastly, aligning with the clinic's commitment to diversity and inclusion, student managers directly contacted Black-owned businesses via telephone. These focused efforts collectively contributed to the success of the 2023 Gala, making it the most impactful one to date.

However, there are still several ways in which the event can be improved and expanded to raise more funds. One approach is to introduce new and innovative raffles (e.g., 50/50 raffles) or auctions (e.g., silent auctions) to draw a wider range of donors and increase fundraising potential. This could be achieved by establishing partnerships with new organizations, leveraging additional social media platforms, and conducting targeted outreach to businesses and individuals in nearby communities. The LFMC continues to extend its influence within its community and actively develops new partnerships, as exemplified in 2023 with Black-owned businesses.

While organizing a Gala is undoubtedly a large undertaking, there are several ways in which SRCs throughout the US can modify this event to enhance their own fundraising efforts. For example, medical schools nationwide often host formal events for their students. The insights from this report can be utilized to adapt such formal events to support SRC fundraising. This might involve incorporating basket raffles or a live auction during the formal event to contribute to a clinic's ongoing initiatives.

When implementing a Gala or any other large-scale fundraising event, it is important to consider potential challenges. It should be noted that the generalizability of this fundraiser may be limited due to its specific focus on an event in the Buffalo area. Different regions or communities may have unique demographics, economic conditions, or fundraising dynamics that need to be

taken into account. Therefore, replicating the same financial results could be difficult for other SRCs. However, the purpose of outlining the processes and procedures of the LFMC's Gala fundraiser is to provide a modifiable template for other clinics to use.

Overall, this descriptive report provides a comprehensive overview of the planning process, successful fundraising efforts, and positive financial outcomes of the LFMC's Annual Winter Gala, serving as a basis for future research and improvement in organizing fundraising events. SRCs can utilize the schema outlined in this report to support their clinic operations and improve their care of underserved communities.

Disclosures

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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