



Clinic executive hopes new bill will help lure physicians to Starr County

12 August 2009
Steve Taylor

SAN JUAN, Aug. 12 - The good news for Starr County residents is that Nuestra Clinica del Valle has received sufficient federal funding to offer affordable health care in the county. The bad news is that the non-profit finds it really difficult to find health care professionals prepared to work there.

"It's difficult to recruit docs because we can't compete with the private sector," said Lucy Ramirez, executive director of Nuestra Clinica del Valle. "It's great that we are now in Starr County but it poses additional challenges because of the staffing issue. It's hard enough to recruit here in Hidalgo County, never mind Starr County."

Ramirez hopes new legislation passed during the 81st legislative session will help. The legislation creates an enhanced physician loan repayment program. Family care physicians who agree to practice in underserved areas of the state, like the Rio Grande Valley, will get assistance in paying off the student loans they incurred during medical school training. Some medical school graduates carry a debt as high as \$160,000.

Discussion on House Bill 2154 took place at a news conference held at Nuestra Clinica del Valle's San Juan office on Tuesday. The news conference was called by the Texas Association of Community Health Centers (TACHC) to honor the work of state Reps. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, and Armando "Mando" Martinez, D-Weslaco.

Gonzales played a key role in the passage of HB 2514. Martinez succeeded with legislation to keep alive and fund a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) incubator program. Both were awarded a plaque and a doctor's white coat in appreciation of their work during the recent session.

The news conference coincided with National Health Center Week. Present at the event were Ramirez, the two state legislators, TACHC Executive Director Jose E. Camacho, Nuestra Clinica del Valle Chairman Joel Gonzalez, Elena Marin, executive director of Su Clinica Familia in Harlingen, and Paula Gomez, executive director of Brownsville Community Health Center.

Ramirez pointed out that the Valley is designated a Health Professional Shortage area because it does not meet a minimum national threshold of one physician for every 3,500 people. "We are very appreciative of the work of Representatives Gonzales and Martinez," Ramirez said.

Camacho said Gonzales deserves credit for helping to address a "critical shortage" of physicians across the state. He said more than half of Texas counties currently need additional primary care physicians.

"Thanks to the hard work of Rep. Gonzales, as many as 225 primary care physicians per year will be providing health care in underserved areas of Texas in the years ahead," Camacho said. "Access to health care in urban and rural areas remains critical as our population grows. Rep. Gonzales' efforts and all those who supported the physician loan repayment legislation help assure healthcare will be available for those that need it."

As the Guardian reported during the session, funding for the physician loan repayment program will come from closing a loophole in the taxing of smokeless tobacco. Camacho said Gonzales had to fight the powerful tobacco lobby to get the legislation passed.

In order to qualify family practitioners would have to serve in areas designated as medically underserved for a minimum of four years, and in turn would qualify for more than \$150,000 in loan repayment.

"Physicians and health centers consider House Bill 2154 to be the most significant legislation to pass in decades because of its potential to bring basic medical care to millions of Texans in the border region and underserved communities of our state," Tom Banning, chief executive officer of the Texas Academy of Family Physicians, told the Guardian at the time.



Nuestra Clinica del Valle Executive Director Lucy Ramirez. (Photo: RGG/Steve Taylor)

“Within four years, Texas will have 900 new physicians serving communities in need. Texas established the nation’s first physician loan repayment program and will once again serve as a national model for recruiting and retaining physicians to serve in our medically underserved communities.”

The medical importance of this is underscored by the statistics for physicians working in medically underserved areas:

* The national average is 81 primary care physicians for every 100,000 people. Texas averages 68 for every 100,000 people.

* By 2015, Texas will need more than 4,500 additional primary care physicians and other providers to care for the state’s underserved population, predicted to be 5.3 million people.

* More than half of Texas’ counties need more primary care physicians. 114 counties do not meet the national standard of one physician for every 3,500 people.

“New doctors coming out of medical schools now have an incentive to practice primary care in the Rio Grande Valley and other areas of great need,” Gonzales said. “It was a privilege to work with my colleagues on a bill that will have such a positive impact for health care access.”

Camacho said Martinez deserves praise for his work on legislation for a FQHC incubator program that provides an avenue for funding new clinics. He said with the legislation, the incubator program would have expired on Sept. 1.

“These centers provide essential care to people throughout the Rio Grande Valley and across our state,” Camacho said. “By working to maintain critical funding, rep. Martinez assures care will be available in areas where it’s needed most.”

Martinez filed the original House bill to keep alive the incubator program and sponsored the Senate version.

“I’m proud to have worked on legislation that touches the lives of people in my district, across the Rio Grande Valley and throughout Texas,” Martinez said. “These centers are essential delivery points for care. We must assure they are in a position to meet current demands while also ready to address the growing needs of our state.”

While the news conference was going on upstairs, the clinic was packed downstairs. “We see 500 to 600 people a day. We are swamped with work,” Ramirez said.

The above story has been updated since the original posting to fix the technical glitches in the copy.

© Copyright of the Rio Grande Guardian, www.riograndeguardian.com, Melinda Barrera, Publisher. All rights reserved.