

Expanding health care for the needy

West Modesto clinic adds staff, more patient services

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The lethargic 4-year-old girl lay against her mother's breast, her right eye pink, her forehead warm. The pair had been waiting to see a doctor at the West Modesto Medical Clinic for nearly two hours.

"It's Friday. If I don't wait, where will we go?" the woman said in Spanish. "Imagine the cost of having to take her to the hospital."

Outside the Sixth Street building, a construction crew worked in searing heat cementing concrete blocks together. Five months from now, the new walls will enclose a dental clinic, several examination rooms and a pharmacy.

"I hope when they've finished they'll have better service here," the woman said. A seasonal cannery worker and the wife of a farmworker, she said she has no health insurance and does not qualify for Medi-Cal except in extreme emergencies, because her children are too old.

The clinic, for 10 years one of the only places in Stanislaus County for poor people to get health care, charges her only a few dollars per visit.

Better, more comprehensive service is exactly what the clinic staff had in mind when it decided to expand.

"When it is all said and done, it's a tremendous opportunity for us to respond to a tremendous need in the community," said Mike Sullivan, executive director of Merced Family Health Centers Inc., the non-profit corporation that runs the Modesto facility.

That need was determined through experience and after an analysis of the availability of care for the low-income people of Modesto.

They found that besides the West Modesto Clinic and Stanislaus Medical Center, which is the county hospital, no other major facility was serving the low-income people. A larger immigrant population, a growing migrant farmworker community and more people living below the poverty line, told clinic directors it was time to grow.

"We decided we were going to need a large facility to serve the demand," Sullivan said. The clinic also has hired two doctors — Dr. Mark Davis and Dr. Long



Eric Slomanson/The Bee

Buzz Williams works on the West Modesto Medical Clinic addition.

Thao — and plans to hire a third when the addition is complete.

For about a year, the clinic had two doctors, one of whom worked part time. The clinicians have been treating about 20 patients per doctor a day, or approximately 7,000 outpatients a year, compared with 145,000 outpatient visits at Scenic General Hospital — since renamed the Stanislaus Medical Center — last year.

The physicians, who for the most part are family practitioners, get pay comparable to other physicians' salaries, Sullivan said. The idea behind the \$400,000 expansion, Sullivan said, is to create a place where a patient can get most of his or her health care under one roof.

"Many times, we give prescriptions and we do not have the total security that

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those prescriptions will be filled, or that they will be taken as the providers requested."

Some clients have a hard time getting to a pharmacist or, because they cannot speak English, are unable to talk about their prescription with the pharmacist. "We really believe a pharmacy is the kind of program that has to be part and parcel of a good health care system," Sullivan said.

The dental clinic also is a must, Sullivan said, because people who cannot afford dental care or who have no insurance virtually have nowhere to turn. The county will open its new dental clinic on Monday, but will take only patients referred from county indigent health programs and already the line for service is long.

"Oral health is something that the underserved — the poor — either don't get, or put off until it's a take-the-tooth-out situation. That's just not right. Oral health is a very important part of good health care."

To pay for the clinic expansion, Sullivan said it is taking advantage of federal grants and private donations.

The Sierra Foundation gave the clinic \$45,000, specifically toward improving care for low-income, pregnant women. The clinic also used money left over from federal grants. But the greatest portion of funds — about \$300,000 — came in the form of a federal reimbursement for health center services to Medi-Cal and Medicare patients.

Begun in 1989, the Federally Qualified Health Center Program allows the clinic to treat Medicare and Medi-Cal

patients and be reimbursed for the exact cost of those services. Normally, doctors receive only about 60 cents on the dollar for treating patients with the subsidized insurance.

At least 40 percent of the clinic's patients live below the federal poverty level, Sullivan said. Most of those people are eligible for Medi-Cal, but some, because they are recent immigrants or for other reasons, are ineligible. Those patients get a 75 percent discount on services. For working people who come to the clinic, charges are based on a fee scale depending on the patient's income.

"It's not a free clinic," Sullivan said. "We do have minimums and we do expect to get \$15 per visit from patients. To be very honest, we choose not to be very strict. We don't really want to charge people a penny."