

Women won't be turned away

Expanded center can serve 1,100

By DIANE BOOTH
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Pregnant women like Rebecca Barrios who sought prenatal care and nutrition education were once turned away because there were just too many patients to help at the cramped Merced Family Health Center.

"A lot of walk-ins are turned away," said Michael Sullivan, executive director of the health center.

But the newly opened Women's Health Center and Women, Infants and Children Services Center at Childs Avenue and N Street will be able to handle the growing number of people in need of their services.

The four exam rooms in the old facilities were used to care for about 600 pregnant women a year, he said. The expanded facility will be able to serve about 1,100 women this year, he said.

"This will allow us to serve more needy pregnant women," Sullivan said. "We will clearly serve more people."



Sun-Star photo by Jim Byous

Hundreds tour the Women's Health Center and Women, Infants and Children Services Center on opening day.

Barrios of Merced, who is expecting her fifth child, has taken advantage of the wealth of information available to her at the center.

She has learned about the benefits of breastfeeding and through nutrition education she has improved the eating habits of herself and her family.

"This clinic is really helpful," she said.

The Women's Health Center is a 5,700-square-foot facility designed to provide quality medical care and preventive health education to low-income women.

The emphasis is on maternity care, family planning and health education.

The center consists of treatment and examination rooms, a counseling room, doctors' offices and a medical records room.

In the past two years, the WIC program has expanded from serving 3,800 clients to about 6,800 clients this year.

The new 4,320-square-foot WIC Services Center, which contains a classroom and several counseling rooms, will help meet the health needs of those additional people.

WIC is a federal assistance program for pregnant and lactating women and infants and children up to age 5 who are lacking proper nutrition. It provides nutrition education and supplemental food coupons to help improve eating habits.

"The new space will allow us to comfortably provide WIC program services," Sullivan said, such as providing the extra space to allow counselors to provide one-on-one education to clients.

And the space no longer occupied by the WIC program will be used to improve and expand the clinic's dental program, Sullivan said.

Bettie Vierra, a certified nurse midwife at the center, took visitors on tours of the new facility during the grand opening festivities.

"We take care of anyone who comes in that door," Vierra said, whenever possible and she hopes the new facility will prevent anyone from being turned away.

"When we had meetings we found out we're turning away about 30 to 40 patients a day," she said. "I don't know that we're going to have to turn people away any more," she said.

The center offers care for pregnant women from the initial prenatal exam to the post-partum exam. They also talk to a nutritionist and undergo a psycho-social assessment to determine the conditions under which they live, such as finding out about shelter, clothing, transportation and if they are battered.

Vierra is seeing more and more women come to the center who once were covered by health insurance, but no longer are insured because they or their husbands lost their jobs.

Judy Ramirez, a nutrition aide at the WIC center, took clients and visitors on tours of the new building.

"We're seeing a lot of hungry kids," she said. Many children of migrant workers whose livelihoods have been affected by the December freeze are receiving food supplement vouchers.

"There has to be a nutritional risk involved," Ramirez said.

And she is seeing more and more people using the program because the community is growing and there is a rising number of teen-age mothers.