

Group brainstorms how to bring health care to underserved communities

WATSONVILLE -- A Latina with no car needs cancer treatment, so she leaves her house at 5 a.m. on a trek to the hospital.

Another woman, diagnosed with cancer, can't find a Spanish-speaking support group.

An elderly woman is advised to eat organic foods but she can't afford them.

Breaking down these barriers in health care access between the haves and the have-nots in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties was the topic of a forum here on Friday.

The Access to Care Forum, in its second year, brought together nurses and physicians with advocates for African-American and Latino care to swap ideas and business cards.

The good news, said Rachel Mesia, who works at the Stanford Cancer Center, is that clinics exist around the Bay Area to help the underserved.

"But they haven't been talking as a group," Mesia said.

They did Friday.

Among the ideas:

- More clinics could offer bilingual services, a physician suggested.
- Why not hand out CDs in Spanish to trucks transporting migrant workers, pitched a nurse.
- Free health care screenings could become a monthly service, suggested Sylvia Waldrup Quarles, president of the NAACP chapter in Monterey.

The forum brought stories of clinics already bridging the gap.

Tony Acosta runs eight Spanish-speaking health clinics in Salinas.

Acosta also drops by the fields in his mobile clinic, encouraging Latinos to step inside for free diabetes and heart disease screenings.

They can buy prescription drugs for \$4 as well as discounted eye exams and glasses, but many don't make it out to the clinic, and not only because they lack cars or sick days.

"They're not used to seeing a doctor," Acosta said. "They drink herbs, practice traditional medicine."

But they do trust Acosta's Clinica de Salud, a familiar presence in the fields; with more employees, he says he could drive his clinic-on-wheels up and down Santa Cruz County.

The steering committee has 30 days to mold the ideas into a plan, which organizer Nancy Valdez hopes will attract outside interest; the coalition's planning effort is being funded by a grant from the American Cancer Society.