

Salud Para La Gente explores Live Oak expansion: Nonprofit clinic celebrates 30 years with plan to step up services

WATSONVILLE

Since its start as a free children's clinic in one of Watsonville's poorest neighborhoods, Salud Para La Gente has become the medical home for thousands of people in Santa Cruz and neighboring counties.

Now, the clinic, celebrating its 30th anniversary as a nonprofit, is poised to grow some more. With new funding available under federal health care reform, Salud's leaders are eyeing Live Oak as a possible site for a new clinic. They plan to apply for a federal grant this month. "If there is a need and an opportunity to get funding, it's the logical course," said Dr. Jose Chibras, Salud's chief medical officer. "Personally, I want to fill the gaps."

Comprehensive care

Elizabeth Mendez stretched and smiled and stuck out her tongue as Dr. Maria Elevado peered into her ears at Salud Para La Gente's Clinica del Valle del Pajaro.

Elizabeth, 4 months, in for a well-baby checkup on a recent morning, is one of hundreds of babies Salud is making sure get a healthy start to life this year.

"We're pretty busy," Elevado said. "We see one to two newborns every day."

But babies are just the beginning at Salud Para La Gente, which translates as Health for the People. With a full suite of health services -- medical, dental and vision -- Salud cares for all ages, "from conception to the twilight of life" is how Chibras puts it. Its patients come from as far afield as Scotts Valley and Hollister.

In addition to

Clinica del Valle del Pajaro on the grounds of Watsonville Community Hospital, Salud operates its main clinic on East Beach Street, a few blocks from the City Plaza, and another on Green Valley Road.

In the past decade, Salud also has extended its reach to Santa Cruz, opening a clinic in Beach Flats. It also operates Elderday, which provides day care and health services to seniors at a center near Harvey West Park.

Salud's patients are farmworkers and truck drivers, house cleaners and retail clerks, landscapers and day laborers. They're the students who visit the Salud clinics at seven Watsonville area schools. They are the uninsured and the under served, and lately, the unemployed, said Marc Pimentel, board chairman.

"We don't care how much you make, how much cash you have in your pocket. You come into Salud and we'll take care of you. Only a handful of places do that," Pimentel said.

He said the need is tremendous, and when Salud adds staff, appointment books quickly fill.

"There's demand out there we have not been able to satisfy," Pimentel said.

In 2009, Salud saw 23,000 patients during more than 113,000 visits.

Humble Start

The need was there from the beginning, according to Barbara Garcia, a founding board member and later executive director.

Founded in 1978 as a free clinic to serve farmworker children, Salud's first home was a former apple packing shed on Grove Street, not far from the Pajaro River.

Garcia, who is now San Francisco's deputy director of health, recalled hundreds of people lining up each month to see a doctor.

Though there was a county clinic in Freedom, the need was greater than it could accommodate and it stretched out from Watsonville to communities like Las Lomas in Monterey County, as well as to rural San Benito County.

"There was a lack of bilingual persons, a lack of primary care providers, and also the tri-county piece," Garcia said.

By 1980, the group of volunteers running the free clinic saw the need for a more official organization, and established the nonprofit, making Salud eligible for state funding.

The demand jumped again when the 1989 earthquake shook Watsonville. Salud was the first to respond to the crumbled downtown, and in the days that followed more than 5,000 injured and frightened people walked through its doors. Salud set up mobile clinics in rented vans and headed out to labor camps and hard-hit neighborhoods. It distributed donated food and clothing. For a while, with the many made homeless by the temblor, Garcia said, it looked like Salud might go into the housing business -- but that would have been a stretch, she said.

"Salud just got in there and did what we needed to do," Garcia said.

Looking ahead

Chibras, the medical officer, said Salud's still looking to do what it needs to do.

He and executive director Dr. Zettie Page acknowledged some health-care providers in North County are a little nervous about Salud's expansion plans.

But they said they're not looking to muscle into anyone else's territory. Rather Salud wants to work in collaboration with others to ensure those who need access to a full range of services, get it. It could mean partnerships with more specialized groups, extended hours or referral services, they said.

But because of a quick turnaround time for applying for the federal grant, there's been little time to explore how such partnerships would work, Chibras said.

The deadline for applying for the \$650,000 grant is Nov. 17. Chibras said Salud has had about 30 days to put it together.

But the two leaders said they have a responsibility to act.

"We're positioning our agency to expand our service capacity so we can support 100 percent access with no disparity in services," Page said. "So the right care is given at the right time to the right people."