

Struggling to stay healthy

Local organizations help those who can't afford health care, but the cost daunts many.

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— Compiled by Greg Mellen

A crowded hallway at the Children's Clinic at Miller Children's Hospital in Long Beach becomes a gathering place for parents and children waiting to see doctors. The clinic offers medical treatment for low income families. (Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram)

LONG BEACH - It's a typical day outside The Children's Clinic in the basement space it rents from Miller Children's Hospital. The waiting area is packed and noisy. Some children race around and play with toys, while others nervously cling to their parents. The wait can extend to four hours on particularly hectic days. Inside the tiny offices of the clinic, the scene is no less chaotic as doctors squeeze between patients in the crowded hallways and into and out of exam rooms. On an average day, the six or seven doctors will see up to 150 patients.

In one room, Sylvia Orna, 45, waits with her 4-year-old son, Anthony, who has Down syndrome, for a routine exam. Without the low-cost help of The Children's Clinic, she said, she doesn't know what she would do.

In another room, Lorena Perez, a high school student, and her father, Gilbert, await her cardiology results. In the hallway, Margarita Crisosto, 25, is bringing in her infant daughter, Evelyn Camacho, for her first visit. All are Long Beach residents who struggle financially. All are seen, regardless of citizenship status, ability to pay or whether they have insurance. Resources Many who lack insurance are helped with enrollment for Medi-Cal, which offers free health care to the poor, or Healthy Families or Healthy Kids, which offer low-cost insurance. According to the Children's Defense Fund, about 60 percent of uninsured children in the state are eligible for Medi-Cal or Healthy Families Benefits.

A new health survey released by UCLA shows 763,000 children in California (7.3 percent) lack health insurance. In Long Beach, it is estimated that 80,000 residents lack health insurance.

A 1999 national survey, sponsored by the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, found 41 percent of parents of uninsured children said they postponed seeking medical care for their child because they could not afford it. Research shows poverty has a profound effect on the health and well-being of the poor.

In Long Beach, Department of Health and Human Services Director Ron Arias estimates about \$23 million of a health services budget of \$35 million to \$40 million goes to services for people in poverty.

"Much of our work focuses on sectors that have the least," Arias says.

The Department of Health and Human Services receives about 400,000 visits a year. The DHHS does not offer primary care, but has a wide array of health education and outreach services, including clinics (for immunizations, HIV/AIDS, family planning and sexually transmitted diseases); family services; substance abuse prevention and treatment; Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program services; child care; family and youth services; in-home health inspections and more.

Meanwhile, The Children's Clinic receives about 55,000 patient visits a year at its six Long Beach sites, including three at local schools. Among its numerous health and outreach programs, the clinics offer general pediatric care, including well-child care and sick care; primary health care for adults and adolescents; some pediatric specialty care; an eye clinic; chronic disease management for asthma, obesity, diabetes and depression; prescription medications; referrals; social services; walk-in immunizations and tuberculosis testing and educational programs.

The annual operating cost for The Children's Clinic is about \$10 million and has grown about 30 percent in the past two years, while patient visits have jumped more than 37 percent. The annual operating cost for the three school clinics alone is \$1.53 million. The Children's Clinic collects what it can based on the programs patients qualify for under state and federal funding guidelines. Any shortfall is made up through fundraising.

Other clinics

On the Westside of Long Beach, many low-income residents rely on the Westside Neighborhood Clinic. The non-profit provides free or low-cost health care, including primary health care for adults and children, geriatric care, women's health care, prenatal and obstetrical care, pediatric services, immunizations, nutrition education, family planning, health education and laboratory and pharmacy services.

At Memorial Medical Center, of about 80,000 emergency room visits, half were described as low-income.

St. Mary Medical Center, which serves much of the low-income community in Long Beach, reports that 44 percent of its patients are covered by Medi-Cal.

Poor children are more susceptible to health problems, and in Long Beach they show high rates of asthma, obesity and diabetes. Adults show high rates of diabetes, hypertension and depression. And, according to Douglas Nelson of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a national nonprofit that supports disadvantaged children and families, "in places where family stresses are compounded by poverty, violence, and drugs, adolescents are at a much higher risk of creating a pregnancy and getting sexually transmitted diseases."

Seeking help

The poor are often reluctant to seek help. Even so, many come in search of local services.

"We're saturated," said Dr. Elisa Nicholas, The Children's Clinic's chief executive officer.

The first of the organization's school satellite clinics opened at International Elementary in downtown Long Beach about 10 years ago. International's clinic is open two half-days a week and serves only children. The other two school clinics, at Hamilton Middle School in North Long Beach and Cesar Chavez Elementary, near Third Street and the 710 Freeway, are open five days a week and serve children and adults.

At Chavez Elementary, Jasmine Limones, 4, waits for an exam required for entry into preschool at Edison Elementary. Limones' mother, Josefina Alcasa, sitting in one of the clinic's four exam rooms, said she and her children use the clinic to get immunizations, physicals and treatment for illnesses.

"It helps everybody out," said Alcasa, who has three children.

In addition to the clinics, children's health needs are also served by the district's more than 65 school nurses, who can refer needy children to outside providers, such as The Children's Clinic, for further care.

Healthy lifestyles

Low income, long work schedules and a lack of access to healthful food choices make it more difficult for poor families to lead a healthful lifestyle, Nicholas said.

"If you are a poor family, your choices are more limited," she said.

Nicholas said the clinic counsels families on healthful, easy-to-prepare and culturally appropriate meals such as "caldo do pollo," a Mexican version of chicken soup.

It's not just diet that can be affected by economic circumstances. The presence of mold and dust in many low-income homes and air pollution from highways can pose health risks and aggravate asthma, she said.

"The health care delivery is certainly very important, but the environment in which they are living ... has a profound effect."

In poor neighborhoods, substandard housing can lead to environmental hazards such as lead contamination, and exacerbates health problems.

Elina Green leads the Long Beach Alliance for Children with Asthma. She says 95 percent of her group's clients are from low-income families. Her group sends public health workers to inspect homes and give residents tips on how to improve the home environment, treat symptoms and learn about health hazards.

"We have housing that's triggering asthma," Green says of the substandard condition of many homes in poor neighborhoods. "What people don't know is their houses are killing them or making them sick."