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The Children's Clinic Provides Healthcare Access To The Underserved



The Children's Clinic has offered free or low cost healthcare to underserved communities since 1939. It has since expanded to six clinics in Long Beach, including the Main Clinic at 2801 Atlantic Ave., where CEO Elisa Nicholas, M.D., visits with staff and patients. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **THYDA DUONG**
Staff Writer

Given the fragile state of California's healthcare system, one can only imagine the impact of a daily addition of 150 patients in the Long Beach area's already overwhelmed emergency rooms. Fortunately, that isn't the case due to The Children's Clinic, Serving Children and Their Families (TCC), a Long Beach-based nonprofit organization that serves more than 16,000 patients annually through roughly 50,000 healthcare visits.

Founded in 1939, TCC operates a sys- [Please Continue To Page 15](#)

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tem of six clinics, providing free or very low cost healthcare to the uninsured, underinsured or those who receive Medi-Cal, Healthy Families, Healthy Kids or Medicare. In 2006, the organization delivered 11,000 immunizations and issued more than 23,000 medications and prescriptions.

While it primarily serves the Greater Long Beach area, TCC patients come from as far as Temecula and Lake Elsinore. Los Angeles County alone is home to roughly 2.8 million uninsured residents, according to The Children's Clinic CEO Elisa Nicholas, M.D.

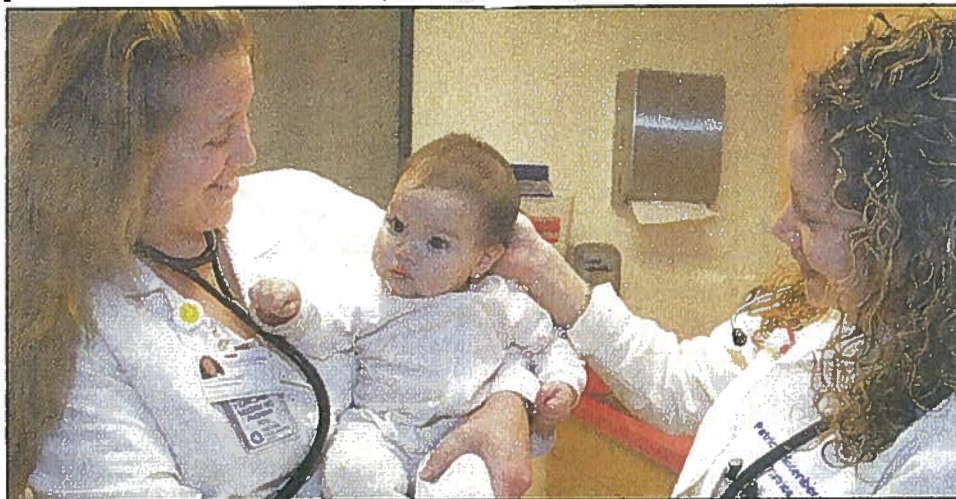
"[With] almost every patient we have, their parents are working or they're working – and some are working two jobs," Nicholas says. "But they're working in jobs that don't provide health insurance, or if [employers]

provide health insurance, it's such a high deductible that they can't afford it."

With support from its 13-member board of directors and 23-member advisory board, TCC's volunteers and roughly 140 employees – many of whom speak more than one language – provide medical care and counseling, social services and community outreach and education.

The organization places a strong emphasis on health maintenance, preventive healthcare and treatment of chronic diseases, particularly adult diabetes and childhood asthma, which are the number one chronic diseases of those respective populations, Nicholas says.

To manage childhood asthma, TCC's community health workers provide in-home assessments, partnering physicians with



Above, Children's Clinic CEO Elisa Nicholas, M.D. stops in the waiting room at the Main Clinic to say hello to four-year-old Jovana Reed. Top, resident physician Carla Nelson (left) and Patricia Goldenberg, M.D., examine six-month-old Emma Juarez. (Photographs by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

parents to control the disease. It is a highly regarded program that has been a model for other sites around the country, she says.

TCC has also partnered with the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services to address adult diabetes, promoting education and maintaining a registry that enables them to track how well the diabetes is being controlled.

"We're helping families early in their disease rather than later to try to keep them healthy, keep them out of the emergency room . . . and help them be productive members of our community," Nicholas says. "As a pediatrician, my role is to keep children healthy so they can achieve and become doctors themselves – that's my dream. And we know which of our patients have gone to college and we all celebrate it. . . . We really celebrate the success of our families just as we mourn when some of our very chronically ill children pass away."

TCC's Healthy Lifestyles Program, meanwhile, continues to grow. Designed to promote lifestyle changes to prevent obesity and related illnesses, the program educates both patients and staff, and does so motivationally. "Telling a child 'don't, don't, don't' isn't going to work," Nicholas says. "It's letting them know that we want them to have a healthy lifestyle, not that they're fat or that they need to lose weight."

In addition to being a founding member of the Long Beach Alliance for Children With Asthma, TCC's community programs include Reach Out And Read, which promotes literacy, and Community Partners Council, which trains parents to be health leaders. Members meet once a month to discuss ways to improve the health and well-being of their community, including offering classes such as folklorico, healthy cooking and aerobics; speaking with police officers about community crime; and employing a mental health support group.

Mental health, Nicholas notes, is a very big issue in the community and is an area in which TCC would like to grow its services. "Many people would prefer to seek their care within the clinic rather than go to an outside mental health provider because of the stigma," she says. "We're constantly looking for new and better ways to provide service to our community, but we're also constantly having to look for funding to do that."

While TCC does not turn anyone away because of inability to pay, the clinics do have capacity issues, Nicholas notes.

"If [we] had more funding, we could see more patients," she says. "Half of our patients are uninsured, and we do get some reimbursement for those patients, but not enough to cover the full cost of the visit and the lab, X-ray and medication. We get money from the county to see some of the uninsured, . . . but that doesn't cover the full cost; it's about \$64 short of what it actually costs a clinic to see those patients."

In addition to treating run-of-the-mill illnesses such as colds and allergies, TCC serves community members suffering from cerebral palsy, autism and seizures – services it would like to expand but that again, would require more funding, Nicholas says.

"It's all about caring for the children and their families in a very difficult healthcare financing situation," she says. "It's a very tough year for us, with the recession coming and the county shortfalls. They're now talking about shifting some of the patients over to community clinics like ours, and that has to be done very carefully and thoughtfully because they don't want to destabilize us also."

"But we're willing to do more if need be; we just need to get the funding to do it," Nicholas adds. "We're very committed to serving the families that we serve."

For more information on The Children's Clinic, call 562/492-6703 or visit www.thechildrensclinic.org. ■