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In Neighborhoods

BUILDING A **HEALTHY** SACRAMENTO

New Program Gives Undocumented Residents Access to Care

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Marcos, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, dreams of getting a green card that would identify him as a legal U.S. resident. He knows the process may take years. In the meantime, he has obtained a different card, one that identifies the 29-year-old Sacramento landscaper as a client of Healthy Partners, Sacramento County's new primary care program for undocumented county residents.

"This card represents a lot to me, because it represents my health," says Marcos, who asked that his full name not be printed. "If I need a checkup, I can go see my doctor at Healthy Partners."

Citing fiscal constraints, the county discontinued primary health services to undocumented immigrants in 2009 in a bid to save \$2.4 million a year. But last summer, amid a rebounding economy, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors re-established primary health care through the Healthy Partners Program. The board's unanimous vote sent a powerful message: Denying basic health care to "people without papers" endangers the public health.

The program opened Jan. 4 at the Sacramento County Health Center on Broadway, with an initial commitment to provide free primary and preventive health care to 3,000 low-income undocumented clients ages 19 to 64. Services are delivered by Health Center staff who also serve Medi-Cal enrollees. Services include primary health care, medication services, flu shots, women's health, and treatment of chronic conditions.

Enrollment assistance and outreach for Healthy Partners is provided by, among others, Sacramento Covered and La Familia Counseling Center. Both nonprofits receive support from The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative. The clinic has had no shortage of clients.

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"We've experienced a steady enrollment flow since our opening," says Jodi Nerell, a licensed clinical social worker who directs the Healthy Partners Program for the county's Department of Health and Human Services, Primary Health Services Division.

As of late February, about 1,000 people had received medical services through Healthy Partners. About 95 percent identified Spanish as their preferred language, with the rest citing Russian and Mien as their primary tongues.

When county supervisors voted to fund the primary care program, they said they expected local hospitals to contribute at least \$1 million worth of services, according to The Sacramento Bee. Sacramento



At right, Jodi Nerell, LCSW, Program Coordinator for the new Healthy Partners Program, works with John Onate, MD, Medical Director at the Sacramento County Health Center in Sacramento, which began seeing undocumented adult residents on Jan. 4. Photo by Melissa Uroff

Physicians Initiative to Reach Out, Innovate and Teach (SPIRIT) program will also donate specialty services valued at an estimated \$1.5 million to the program.

Besides The Endowment, other partners include the Mexican Consulate in Sacramento. With so many partners — clients being No. 1 — it was only natural the program be christened Healthy Partners.

The name "embodies (our) partnership... with our patients and with our stakeholders," says Nerell, who expects services in the program to continue into next year.

BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In 2010, The California Endowment launched a 10-year, \$1 billion plan to improve the health of 14 challenged communities across the state. Over the 10 years, residents, community-based organizations and public institutions will work together to address the socioeconomic and environmental challenges contributing to the poor health of their communities.

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