

STAR Conejo Valley

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Patient numbers increase at clinic

Lack of insurance credited for boost

By Esther Suh
Correspondent

More patients are expected this year at a free medical clinic that operates weekly out of a Thousand Oaks church than in the past, organizers said. Economic circumstances are behind the increase at the Westminster Free Clinic, said project director Lisa Safaeinili.

Too many employers can't afford health care for their workers, she said.

"They hire employees for fewer hours, so the people work multiple part-time jobs without medical insurance," she said. "The working poor can't afford medical insurance, but they don't qualify for Medi-Cal."

Safaeinili said the clinic served 890 patients in 2001 and more than double that — 2,000 patients — in 2002. When the count is made at the end of this year, Safaeinili expects the clinic will have treated more patients than it did in 2002.

Founded in 1994, the clinic provides medical attention for the homeless and the growing uninsured community in eastern Ventura County. The demand at the clinic mirrors similar trends nationwide.

The Westminster clinic makes ends meet with volunteers and donations. Area foundations, including the Kaiser Permanente Foundation, the Amgen Foundation and the Baxter BioScience Foundation, help fund the needs of the increased demand has been challenging, because many nonprofit organizations are competing for similar donations, Safaeinili said.

Adults, students, nurses and doc-



Photos by Michelle Yoo / Special to the Star

Dr. Steven Kamajian of Montrose, an 11-year volunteer at the Westminster Free Clinic at New Life Church in Thousand Oaks, tries to determine why Remedios Salas of Newbury Park has an earache.



Delmar Farfan, center, of Thousand Oaks is examined by clinic volunteers Ashkon Niroomand, left, and Nabeel Hameed.

teacher at Thousand Oaks High School who helps translate for Spanish-speaking patients. He has helped parents of his students.

"People may have insurance, but they don't care about those who don't," Valdez said. "They don't realize that these are people who cook your food. It's in everybody's interest to see these people get taken care of."

The clinic also provides a place for the community's young people to volunteer.

Lisa Ha, 17, from La Reina High School enjoys the chance to work directly with people. This is her third year volunteering. She plans to become a registered nurse or physical therapist.

"I'm working with real people and gaining a lot of experience," she said.

The clinic has a strong need for volunteer doctors and nurses, said nurse Mary Miller, clinic coordinator.

To volunteer at the clinic, contact Miller by e-mail at marymiller@yahoo.com.

tors routinely volunteer at the clinic on Wednesday nights at the New Life Church, 950 Warwick Ave., Thousand Oaks. They treat an average of 55 patients per session. Patients are seen at the clinic on a first-come, first-served basis from 6 to 10 p.m.

The clinic offers free patient care, prescriptions and referrals to community partners, such as dentists and optometrists who are willing to provide discounted services. The

clinic pays for these services.

Many patients are diagnosed with diabetes, hypertension or respiratory problems, which, if checked early, can prevent a trip to the emergency room, said Safaeinili.

Despite the challenges, volunteers want to keep families healthy.

"By keeping parents healthy, they can take care of their kids," Safaeinili said.

Manuel Valdez, 55, is a math