

Flying Doctors free clinic returning to east valley

Written by Victoria Pelham The Desert Sun

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Oliva Granados Picaso (middle) grimaces as Dr. Daniel Nam (left) of Oakland injects him with anesthesia before working on his tooth during last year's Flying Doctors event held at Desert Mirage High School in Thermal on Saturday, September 22, 2012. Photo by Gerry Maceda, Special to the Desert Sun

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Oliva Granados Picaso (middle) grimaces as Dr. Daniel Nam (left) of Oakland injects him with anesthesia before working on his tooth during last year's Flying Doctors event held at Desert Mirage High School in Thermal on Saturday, September 22, 2012. Photo by Gerry Maceda, Special to the Desert Sun

Flying Doctors Clinic

Where: Desert Mirage High School, 86150 66th Ave.,

Thermal, CA 92274**When:** 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 28

Services: Medical, dental, vision including providing glasses, mammograms and breast exams, anemia screenings, CPR

certification, acupuncture, physical therapy, chiropractic services, free lunch, child care**Information:**

<http://www.socalflyingdocs.org/> or contact Lucy Moreno at (760) 398-5229.

Hundreds of people are expected to descend on Desert Mirage High School in Thermal this Saturday to once again receive free health care from Flying Doctors, just before the Affordable Care Act begins to roll out insurance targeting.

The clinic, which will be held from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the school, is the latest in 15 years of biannual clinics in the region intended to provide medical, dental, optometry and other healthcare for free to those who otherwise go without. It is their 41st event in the valley. In the past people of all ages have waited overnight to receive care they have put off for months, coming in from near and far, sleeping in their cars and waking up at dawn to get in line.

“(The work) is gratifying,” said Lucy Moreno, community health outreach program coordinator at Clinicas de Salud del Pueblo and current president of the Flying Doctors Southern California chapter. “You see someone out of pain immediately with regards to dental, walking out with glasses when they couldn’t see clearly.”

Moreno expects 800 to 1,000 people to show up to the clinic, despite it being limited to just one day, shorter than past years. The organization did not have the budget this fall to make it lengthier, she said.

She said that it costs about \$60,000 to put on the event, reliant on in-kind donations and community support from local federally qualified health centers, the Coachella Valley Unified School District, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation and other partners.

The Flying Doctors, officially titled Los Medicos Voladores in Spanish and made up entirely of volunteers, visit low-income communities in Mexico, Central and South America but extended their reach to the

Coachella Valley more than a decade ago to treat the often uninsured migrant field workers in the impoverished communities of Thermal and Mecca. They formed an official local chapter last year.

In the spring, the organization worked in partnership with a clinic hosted by Remote Access Medical and Goldenvoice. That clinic saw a total of 2,770 patients at a total of more than \$1 million in value of services provided, according to the chapter's website.

This fall's clinic will include a range of medical, dental, vision care, breast exams and anemia screenings, mammograms, CPR training certification, acupuncture, physical therapy, chiropractic visits and a free lunch. It is intended to ease the gap in health care for the uninsured, underinsured and vulnerable populations in the valley, also affected by a doctor shortage that some say can cause long waits at doctor's offices.

About 59,062 adults in the Coachella Valley went without insurance in 2010, according to the most recent Health Assessment Resource Survey. The valley has a doctor-to-patient ratio of one doctor per 9,000 patients in places, especially the east valley, which officials have said is on par with many Third World countries. The recommendation is one doctor per 2,000..

Over time, the clinics have slowly grown, Moreno said, increasing the number of volunteers and community agencies willing to provide support. This clinic will have 75 volunteers coming in from out of town and 150 local volunteers, including 20 to 25 dentists. Still, Moreno is looking for more local health professionals and doctors to donate their time.

The volunteers this fall will offer about \$500,000 worth in health care in just one day, care that community health stakeholders say is still badly needed.

"It's just our demographics; it's the infrastructure. It's access to health care. It's our transportation. It's education access... the economy," Moreno said. "These all become hurdles (to receiving care)."

Rep. Raul Ruiz, a former emergency room physician, has volunteered at the clinics in the past and recognizes their importance.

"This event is critical for our medically underserved communities," Ruiz said in an email statement. "As a physician, providing quality medical care to those who need it most is a top priority of mine and I look forward to continuing to work with The Flying Doctors towards that end."

Moreno said the need will still continue to be present with the Affordable Care Act in place, especially for those who won't qualify for the coming changes because of their documentation status or their income.

"The need is still rampant in our valley and there's certainly plenty of room for these events," she said.

The Affordable Care Act is expected to bring in hundreds of thousands of people to the insurance fold by offering new policies through state exchanges that include subsidies for those living between 138 and 400 percent of the federal poverty level. The federal poverty level for a single person is \$11,490. Medi-Cal, California's insurance program for the low-income, is also being expanded under the law to those living below 138.

A big focus is also to refer people to follow-up care at either the local federally qualified health centers

including Clinicas de Salud del Pueblo and the Borrego Community Health Foundation or the Indio-based Volunteers in Medicine which opened its doors to a bigger location this spring.

“We’re not a Band-Aid kind of system,” Moreno said.

People being treated for chronic conditions such as diabetes or asthma or who had poor dental health resulting in pain or had masses detected in their mammograms can then be moved into a medical home and have the care gap filled.

Bruce Yeager, executive director of Coachella Valley Volunteers in Medicine, said they were really trying get follow-up care for the community at this clinic.

“It’s been ridiculous to see they get care at these things and then have to wait six months for follow-ups,” Yeager said.

CVVIM, which offers care to valley residents with no eligibility for any insurance and with a household income 200 percent of the federal poverty level or below, received 70 referrals from the spring RAM clinic and is expecting 50 to 100 from this one. There will also be administrative and dental assistant volunteers sent from VIM to help.

The Flying Doctors organization has provided crucial care to people who haven’t been able to get it anywhere else, and they are there to fill in the gaps, Yeager said.

“It’s a very valuable and important event for this area,” he said.

Indio-based Dr. Marco Cazares, a chiropractor with the Spinal Injury Center, has volunteered with Flying Doctors since 2000. He has seen hundreds of patients, helping them with neck, back and joint pain.

“As a doctor you’ve got to give back to your communities since they support you throughout the years,” he said.

The clinics have become more organized, offering more medical services from more volunteers since he started offering up his time, he said.

Cazares sees this Flying Doctors event as a role model for the future, as the Affordable Care Act changes the health care landscape in the valley.

“We can actually provide services to the needy, do it at lesser cost and be able to be ... a first gate or introduction to health care that they didn’t have before,” Cazares said. “They become more aware and more educated on the disease process and therefore they’re more up to try preventive medicine or try medical care they’ve neglected for years.”