

Health clinic nears reality in Oakley

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Elaine Wrigley knows firsthand the dire need in Oakley for a health clinic serving low-income or uninsured people.

Many of her neighbors in The Commons at Oak Grove express frustration with traveling to clinics in Martinez or Brentwood for medication or preventive care, she said. Some need to take busses to the clinics, but even the walk from Carol Lane to the bus stop on Main Street is challenging.

"A lot of people could never walk that far," Wrigley said. "It's a long walk from these apartments."

Many Oakley residents have difficulty accessing health care because of transportation, but help could be on the way. La Clinica, an Oakland-based nonprofit group that works to make health care accessible for all, plans to open a satellite clinic in Oakley, with large support from community activists, local hospitals, Oakley officials and the community.

A 2,800-square-foot site in the Raley's shopping center on Main Street has been chosen to house the clinic, though it remains unclear when it will be built. It would house between six and eight exam rooms and offer other services, such as health education and education on deferring health costs, La Clinica regional director Viola Lujan said.

"It's a huge part of our mission to serve the uninsured and low-income (population)," Lujan said. "We're really excited about this to bring access."

Nancy Marquez, community organizer for Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), said several details, including costs and an opening date, will be discussed with La Clinica board members in early January, but the board seems to be in support of the clinic.

Lujan said several area hospitals, grants and private sector donations will help fund the clinic. Lujan estimates it would cost less than \$250,000. Patient fees would be based on a sliding scale according to income.

CCISCO board member and Oakley resident Theresa Flores said if everything goes according to plan, a clinic could open within two months of La Clinica board approval.

"The feeling is that the board is going to support it, and we can go forward from there," Flores said.

The quest to provide more access for Oakley residents began four years ago with members from St. Anthony Catholic Church. Several members of the church's youth group, including Marquez and Flores, noticed that some parishioners lacked health care and began looking for ways to address the problem.

Flores said the group notified La Clinica, which did a needs assessment to determine whether the area could benefit from a 20-hour-a-week clinic. A CCISCO study in 2007 determined that 15 percent of Oakley residents were without health care, but it's assumed that figure has grown as a result of widespread job losses and the expiration of COBRA benefits.

Oakley has about 35,000 residents and no health care providers.

Transportation isn't the only issue with getting to other clinics. With a high number of people needing care and the limited number of doctors in Brentwood, that city's clinic for those in

need must schedule appointments two to three months from when people call.

The Brentwood clinic also serves Bethel Island and Knightsen residents.

"Getting an appointment is a huge issue," Flores said. "They have to serve so many people."

La Clinica has clinics in Contra Costa, Alameda and Solano counties, including a medical and dental facility in Pittsburg and another health clinic in Pleasant Hill. The group also has mobile services that operate in elementary schools for children in low-income communities.

St. Anthony parishioners are currently working with those in need to make sure they sign up for care at the new site.

"It would really be a boost for the people in those apartment complexes," Wrigley said. "It's going to be a real big help to people here."

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