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SAN DIEGO



Most Influential Innovators

Jeffery Sears and James Stuart of Pirch lead a cast of San Diego entrepreneurs and start-ups who are reshaping the business landscape when it comes to food, gadgets and the life sciences.



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PHOTO BY FAMILY HEALTH CENTERS OF SAN DIEGO

The Logan Heights Family Health Centers of San Diego location is considered the network's flagship.

Clinics grow at feverish pace

With the ranks of the insured growing, community health centers are expanding to meet the need. **By Mike Stetz**

One segment of the health care industry appears to be quite healthy. That would be community health centers, facilities that serve the under-served.

Family Health Centers of San Diego, one of the largest community health care networks in California, opened three clinics last year, with plans for more this year.

Health Center Partners of Southern California, a consortium of primary health care organizations, continues to grow too. Five of its San Diego clinics recently received a total of \$4.6 million in federal funding for expansion.

Large health care development projects, such as the \$943 million Jacobs Medical Center being built by UC San Diego Health, have a tendency to dominate the news because of their size and scope.

However, the growth in community health centers should not be overlooked, said Brandon Sudweeks, CEO of Coldwell

Banker Commercial SC.

"Historically, we've needed new health care facilities where our population has been growing," he said. "Now more people have coverage, particularly in lower-income areas, and there's a growing need to serve them. That's a drastic change."

The reason for the surge is the Affordable Care Act and enhanced Medi-Cal coverage, which have increased the number of insured.

Sudweeks said this has necessitated more clinics, and clinics that offer a wider range

of services. They may include family medicine, urgent care, women's health, dental and mental health services — all under one roof. He's seen them range from 10,000 square feet to as large as 40,000 square feet.

Making the facilities larger is a smart move, he noted. It increases efficiency. A patient doesn't have to be referred to another facility if he or she has a specialized medical need.

In this case, the patient is merely sent down the hall to see the pertinent doctor.

"It's a huge advantage for the patient," Sudweeks said.

Look at the expanded community health clinic that recently opened in Linda Vista. Operated by San Diego Family Care, it is 23,000 square feet in size. It has 21 exam rooms, an adult waiting area and two separate waiting areas for children — so healthy kids don't have to mingle with those who might be contagious.



The center also includes a mental health department where health care advice can be doled out in five languages.

"You know, if it was at a completely separate facility, sometimes people are hesitant to come in or seek help in general," Dr. Gurgiana Stekovski, director of mental health at the clinic, told KPBS. "But here, it makes it easier. It also makes it more comfortable for them."

The need for more clinics is not limited to lower-income communities. For instance, one might think there would not be a pressing need for a community health center in Poway. The median home price, after all, is \$624,000.

However, there is a need, and Poway's first health center is being built.

Even though the city has a low poverty rate, that rate is not at zero. It's 4.9 percent. There are poor in Poway.

Currently, if they need to visit a health clinic, they have to go to Escondido. If they are dependent on public transportation, that can take hours.

"They can miss a full day of work to see a doctor," said Vernita Todd, senior vice president for external affairs for Health Center Partners of Southern California.

This local increase in clinics follows a nationwide trend. As much as \$11 billion has been spent on nearly 1,000 new health centers across the nation to meet the needs of the growing number of insured individuals.

However, Sudweeks worries about a possible unintended consequence of this surge. It could hurt solo practitioners based in lower-income neighborhoods. Patients might be drawn to clinics because of the expanded offerings.

Health clinics are uniquely situated to handle the added demand, Todd said. For one, they have experience treating the poor. Also, they operate on lean budgets.

"We have learned to be efficient," Todd said.

Yes, more people are insured, but not all — by far.

Nearly one-third of Health Center Partners patients have no insurance and pay



Family Health Centers' newest facility, in Oak Park.



Diamond Neighborhoods Family Health Center opened in 2014.



The North Park facility on 30th Street.

on a sliding scale. Only 5.4 percent have private insurance.

"No one gets rich," Todd said. "It's very mission-focused."

Many of the newly insured could present challenges that health centers are prepared to address, she added. They may not have seen a doctor in years because they had no insurance. They may have developed chronic conditions in that time. In short, they likely will not be your average patient with traditional needs.

This will put considerable pressure on all health care providers, said Patty Maysent, CEO of UC San Diego Health System. These patients could have advanced cancer or diabetes, she said. "They could be really sick."

The Jacobs Medical Center, scheduled to open this fall, is a 245-bed advanced medical center that will be treating the seriously ill, she noted. While the trend in health care is to maximize outpatient treatment, those who are very sick need hospital care.

"A large portion of the population hasn't

been getting primary care," she said. So the increase in these community health centers is vital to help prevent more people from incurring serious illnesses because of a lack of health care.

These new patients also need to be retrained not to seek care in emergency rooms, but to go to health clinics instead. The uninsured have gone to ERs, even when their health care needs were not acute.

"We're all struggling with greater ER use," Maysent said.

Community health centers are getting brick and mortar help. However, manpower is a bigger challenge, they say. The biggest threat to this expansion is a lack of health care providers, said Tim Fraser, director of community and media relations for Family Health Centers of San Diego, which recently opened clinics in El Cajon, Oak Park and Chula Vista.

"The challenge is staffing them, to keep centers running efficiently and keep wait times in check," Fraser said. "That's what's keeping us up at night."