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Esperanza Care' expands health care for Monterey County undocumented immigrants

Tom Leyde, For The Californian

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Low-income undocumented immigrants in Monterey County have greater access to free healthcare thanks to a new program introduced Wednesday evening.

Lanzamiento de Esperanza Care is a collaboration among Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action (COPA), Monterey County and Natividad Medical Center.

The one-year program is made possible through \$2 million in funding from surplus Natividad Medical Center funds. The money is built into the hospital budget for 2017-2018.

About 100 people turned out for the event Wednesday at Sacred Heart Catholic Church's Parish Hall on West Market Street. The program is an expansion of a \$500,000 pilot project and provides health services that were not available before.

For instance, participants will now have access to outpatient clinics at Natividad. These include neurology, diabetes, heart and dermatology clinics. Services also include access to the county hospital's laboratory, radiology, ultrasound and MRI services.

"All of us on the (Monterey County) Board of Supervisors are very excited ...," said District 4 Supervisor Jane Parker about Lanzamiento de Esperanza Care. "Compassion and hope is what the county is trying to do by offering expanded care."

"Having health care available to all members of our community is very important. We want everyone to be healthy."

Parker, whose comments were translated into Spanish, said the program is designed to serve undocumented immigrants who would not otherwise have access to consistent health care services.

“The Monterey County Board of Supervisors really appreciates your presence in our community,” she told the audience. “Having health care available to all members of our community is very important. We want everyone to be healthy.”

She praised COPA for informing supervisors about the health care needs of undocumented immigrants.

“COPA comes up with ideas and invites the county to participate,” Parker said. “We worked together to put together ... the pilot program and now Esperanza Care. Without COPA it would be hard for the county to come up with these ideas to serve you.”

Dr. Gary Gray, CEO of Natividad Medical Center and a family physician here for 17 years, said he has observed first hand the impact of delayed health care and the importance of getting prompt care.

“The important part,” he told those present. “is seeing your family physician.”

Family physicians must refer patients to health care specialists at Natividad.

The Public Policy Institute of California estimates there are about 62,000 undocumented immigrants in Monterey County. Many of them work in agriculture and the hospitality industries.

Their need for health care was recognized in 2003 when COPA was founded.

The group was initiated after Maria Elena Manzo discovered that children of undocumented immigrants in Monterey County were unable to get free asthma inhalers while those in Santa Cruz county got them free through the county’s Healthy Kids Program.

Manzo, an asthma educator, a COPA leader from Sacred Heart Catholic Church and a member of Mujeres en Accion, had to tell Monterey County parents to take their children to the emergency room when they had an asthma attack.

Phone calls were made, house meetings were held and COPA was formed. COPA members spoke before the Monterey County Board of Supervisors about health care needs of undocumented immigrants.

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In September 2015, the board of supervisors unanimously approved \$500,000 for the pilot program.

COPA is a nonprofit group operating in Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties. It is composed of 27 member institutions. They include churches, synagogues, public schools, labor groups and other nonprofits.

The group has one lead organizer, two associate organizers and one administrative assistant. There are 200 active leaders. Strategy teams of leaders from member institutions guide the organizing work.

Maria Vazquez, a COPA member with Mujeres en Accion, said that Lanzamiento de Esperanza Care is unique to the tri-county region.

“The journey to get here was long and much work by COPA leaders,” she said. “The leaders would not give up.”

It is not known if the program will continue after a year, she noted.

“We must get organized and keep the conversation going in the community,” Vazquez said.

On that note, attendees gathered into groups with their COPA leaders and chose representatives to be in contact with them on Wednesday.

For more information on COPA, visit copa.nationbuilder.com.