

US: Thousands line up for free health care in Texas

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Over two thousand people lined up to attend a free health care clinic in Houston, Texas, this weekend, the largest one-day event of its kind in the US.

The event, which offered free basic health care for uninsured people, drew a far greater attendance than expected by organizers. Present at the event were 160 doctors and 200 nurses. The clinic offered checkups and minor tests. Ambulances were also present to take critically ill people to hospitals.

One in four people in Texas are uninsured, the highest rate in the country. Harris County, where Houston is located, has 1.3 million uninsured people, a third of the population. More than 47 million people, or 15 percent of the US population, have no health insurance of any kind.

The Houston event follows a free health care clinic in Los Angeles in August. The LA clinic served more people, but was held over several days. Free clinics have historically provided care to the uninsured, but the number of people showing up to clinics has increased in recent months as the economic crisis has worsened.

Dr. Mehmet Oz, a television physician, in collaboration with the National Association of Free Clinics, sponsored the event. Oz recently started his own television show as a spin-off of The Oprah Winfrey Show.

Media reports from the event paint a picture of social catastrophe: parents, children and elderly people who have not seen a doctor or dentist in years; people with major conditions that go untreated because they cannot afford help.

Some lined up before dawn to make sure they would get care. "I wanted to make sure that I was first in line. I'm a single mom and I have a lot to do today," Karen Coney, 47, told the *Houston Chronicle*. She works as a substitute teacher, but cancelled her health insurance

because the premiums were too high. She can't afford regular exams and doctor visits, even though she has chronic health problems.

Nicole Lamoureux, executive director of the National Association of Free Clinics, told the *Chronicle* that there has been a sharp rise in demand for such care. "So many people who do not have insurance don't go to the doctor, so they present with more and more illnesses," she said.

The organization says its clinics helped 4 million people last year, but that this figure is set to double this year as a result of the economic downturn.

The event encapsulates the stark misery that lack of decent medical care imposes on so much of American society. The economic downturn has only exacerbated the crisis in health care as millions more people have lost their jobs, taken pay cuts, and seen quality health care move further out of reach.

For his part, Oz used the event to present a facile solution to the health care crisis in the US. "Part of the goal today is to make it clear that there are Americans here who will help those who need the help," Oz said. "There are ways of supporting those who do not have health care coverage. We need to create a system where all of us can be part of it."

"There are three million Americans who get their care primarily through these free clinics," noted Oz.

Oz called the number of uninsured people in America, "a national catastrophe...but one that we can engage and actually embrace and probably overcome," though he did not say how this would be done.

Tens of millions of people without medical insurance largely do not get any sort of preventative medical care. They live in fear of going to hospitals, where a routine visit could end up costing hundreds of dollars, and

small but life-saving procedures—like appendix removal—can cost as much as many workers earn in a year.

The free clinics, besides being stretched to the limit, offer only the most basic care. Only one in ten uninsured people attended the clinics last year, according to figures from the organization that sponsored the event.

The proposed health care overhaul being pushed through Congress and supported by the Obama administration will only intensify the health care crisis in the US. It will require workers who cannot afford health coverage to purchase private insurance or pay a fine, while also forcing sharp cuts in Medicare and Medicaid funding.



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