

Free clinic exposes health care crisis in Los Angeles

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During the past week, thousands of residents from Los Angeles, California, and surrounding communities, mostly the poor, the uninsured, and unemployed, jammed the free clinic set up by the Knoxville, Tennessee-based Remote Access Medical (RAM) organization at the old Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena.

RAM offers its health clinics mostly out of trailers in rural areas of the US, but it also serves Mexico and some countries in South America. Over the last twenty-five years, the organization has set up almost 480 clinics and treated approximately 380,000 needy patients.

Patients are not required to provide any proof of insurance, income, citizenship or residence status. “Frankly, we don’t care,” a nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “People are people whether they have papers or not.”

In Los Angeles, where 44 percent of adults lack health insurance, the clinic operated on twelve-hour shifts from April 27 through May 3. It offered services in dental, vision, women’s health and a variety other medical areas. There were also test for hepatitis and H1N1 virus.

Over 700 volunteers—doctors, medical staff and general volunteers—were on hand.

The final patient count has not yet been released, but RAM’s organizers estimate that it approached 8,000, far exceeding the 6,000 treated last August. One of the reasons, aside from cutbacks in dental and vision care, is the rising unemployment in Los Angeles County, which now by official measurement tops 12.6 percent.

On the first day of the clinic, more than 5,000 people had either camped out overnight or lined-up outside the

sports arena in order to obtain wristbands for their appointments. By the end of the day, more than 1,200 people had registered for medical services, overwhelming the facilities and the staff. Of these, 546 were female and 490 were male. Fifty-seven of them were 18 years of age or younger. Dentists served approximately 600 people. One hundred and eighty-eight HIV tests were administered, while podiatric services were 112. There were 71 mammograms, 98 pap smears, and 216 acupuncture services.

Stan Brock, RAM’s founder, recently commented, “There’s so many millions of people in this country that just simply cannot afford the medical system. The word ‘remote’ does apply, though, to the chances many, many people in this country have to obtain the care they need.”

RAM’s 700-plus staff consists entirely of volunteers—ophthalmologists, optometrists, opticians, dentists, registered and certified dental hygienists, triage RNs, LPNs, and even veterinarians. Many travel, often at their own expense, to remote corners of the world, where they sometimes work under dire social conditions.

Anticipating that demand for free services could be overwhelming for this year’s clinic, RAM began distributing wristbands on April 25. Last year, RAM was overwhelmed when it set up its free clinic at the Los Angeles Forum and made headlines throughout the world. More than 6,300 were serviced during the week, and many had to be turned away. It is the largest urban clinic kind in the country—a testament to the deteriorating living conditions of large segments of the population.

A volunteer in the vision care section of the clinic

told the *WSWS*, “It’s a scandal that we have to do this. It’s a scandal that in this country so many thousands of people don’t have the medical attention they deserve. Why is this healthcare issue a matter of debate? People should have their health taken care of, for free, like it’s done in most countries. Why did I volunteer? Well, to be honest, because I care. But I also wanted to tell the pharmaceuticals, the insurance companies, to go f— themselves.”

According to Carol Meyer, chief network officer for Los Angeles County’s health system, the approximately 600 county clinics and county-contracted clinics are more overrun this year than last. Because of all the multi-million dollar state cuts to Denti-Cal and Medi-Cal, the county, home to fabulously wealthy celebrities and a world center of the entertainment industry, has had to eliminate many dental and vision services.

“We can’t handle all the patients we have now and it’s getting worse with the economy,” Meyer added. “People are losing their jobs, their insurance, and we’re their last resort.”

Yolanda Vera, a health deputy for the county, said that the truth was that “when you have a week-long clinic, it is not a cure-all for an entrenched healthcare problem.”

According to some RAM sources, one of the most difficult situations facing the patients are the follow-up visits necessary to continue treatment for their illnesses, often chronic; county clinics are overrun and the patients don’t have the means to seek further help.

One RAM volunteer told the *WSWS*, “I think the most difficult day was day one. Boy, it was really tough. Hundreds of people waited almost the entire day in the vision section and couldn’t get their eyeglasses because there were so many people to be served. One of the leaders—I forget his name—went to the trouble of signing the patients’ forms. That way they could be back the following day. Next day people began to line up way before 6 a.m. so they could get their eyeglasses.”

Another news source quoted one of the volunteers as saying that “One surprise was that I expected the masses to be mostly homeless, but it seemed to be a cross-section of all walks of life, which show you how many people lack healthcare.”

In an interview on KPCC, Howard Kahn, chief

executive officer of L.A. Care Health Plan, spoke of the health crisis in Los Angeles County: “The clinics, so far, have been more affected by the downturn in the economy and the number of people that are uninsured that need the services.

“So they’ve had an increase in demand. The budget crisis hasn’t hit those clinics as strongly, except in one big area, which is adult dental services,” Kahn noted. “It’s a health crisis, because when you have dental problems, it leads to medical problems. It leads to infections. It leads to fevers. It can lead to very serious illnesses.”

Oscar Méndez, a truck driver for 10 years, volunteered as an interpreter (English-Spanish) in the vision section of the clinic. He spoke with the *WSWS*: “I came as a volunteer, because it is very important to help people who need help. There are many cases, just as in my country, of poverty. There were times when my family had nothing to eat [in the United States]. Sometimes my mother would not eat so that I could.

“The health situation is bad and is getting worse for the working class,” Méndez commented. “Everything is more difficult. Salaries aren’t going up. Food and housing are becoming very expensive, too.

“Thank God I haven’t lost my job, but my neighbor just lost his house, which shows me that the situation is becoming more difficult,” Méndez told the *WSWS*. “We have to have more job opportunities and we have to make the rich contribute more in taxes. There has to be a change. There has to be a health system that is accessible to everyone, to all who need it.”



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