

Spotlight on: Elsa Widenmann Student Health Center

In the short time since it opened, the new Elsa Widenmann Student Health Center is already making a big difference for students and local families. A child having seizures was recently examined and found to be living with his condition without medication because his family couldn't afford it. Clinic staff made certain the student got his seizure medication and also set up an appointment with a neurologist. Another child was brought in who had been awake and crying for two nights with a painful ear infection. He too received the treatment and medication he needed. A third family brought in their daughter who is obese and has had vision problems for years. The clinic will work with her on her weight issues and new glasses are now on order.

The Elsa Widenmann Student Health Center, which held its Open House on May 18th and began serving patients on June 1st, is located on the campus of Elsa Widenmann Elementary School in Vallejo. The 2,400-sq. ft. center, housed in a portable unit on campus, is the second school health center to open in the Vallejo City Unified School District (VCUSD). It includes three exam rooms where staff provide primary medical care including: physicals; immunizations; dental, vision and hearing screenings; and referrals to specialty care providers for Widenmann students, as well as for other children aged 1-18 years living in Vallejo.

The opening of this student health center marks the culmination of four years of sustained effort by a dedicated group of school district staff. "Back in 2004, when the first student health center opened at Pennycook Elementary, no one at the District knew what a school health center was," explains Kathy Hahn, Coordinator of Student Health Services. "We've come a long way since then and the district has been behind us during the whole start-up process, but it's still been a long and challenging project." Beginning in 2006, Vanita Finney, former



Student receives H1N1 vaccine on opening day of health center.

coordinator for student health services, and MaBella Gonzales, former principal at Elsa Widenmann, got the ball rolling for this health center. "My concern was school attendance and how many non-urgent medical needs prevented children from attending school," explains Gonzales. "As we worked with our collaborative partners we wanted to create a hub where information and resources were available to our school community which would improve the health, well being and lifestyles of students and their families."

The first hurdle was getting the buy-in of the school district and school board during an economic downturn that forced the district to cut many other programs. Then there was the challenge of gathering partners who could provide funding or in-kind services – in this case a group of 20 organizations who came together to form the North Vallejo Health Collaborative. Once the Collaborative was in place, a Healthy Start grant was obtained which provided \$450,000 of start-up money and the funds needed to hire a Healthy Start coordinator. "Our next steps were securing additional grants," says Hahn. "We turned to Kaiser Permanente, S.H. Cowell Foundation, and the

United Way of the Bay Area to obtain funds for the portable we needed to house the health center.” It was more difficult to obtain funding for operating costs, but Kaiser Permanente’s Community Benefits program came through with the critical funding needed for operations. Then began the process of getting state building approvals through the Division of State Architect (DSA). “With every change to our building plans we had to keep going back to the DSA for approvals. All this at a time when state furloughs made turnaround times even longer than normal,” explains Hahn.

Developing a partnership with Touro University, based on nearby Mare Island, was another key factor for the new health center. Dr. James Foy of Touro will serve as the supervising physician and Touro medical students will help with patient intake. Touro’s Pediatrics Club has also been providing health education classes to students and parents in after school sessions for the past two years. “My children are now reminding me of healthier ways to shop and cook dinner,” says Sara Sanchez, a parent who has attended many of the sessions with her two children. Other partner organizations will soon be providing counseling services and other health education services to adults and the elderly when the health center is not seeing pediatric patients.

School administrators, secretaries, and teachers have been anxiously awaiting the opening of the health center and are now primary referral sources. Other outreach has included fliers at Vallejo schools, ads on local TV, and using the elementary school’s automated telephone calling system to alert parents to the health center’s services. Families in Vallejo have repeatedly expressed appreciation for a clinic within walking distance of their homes which is open evening hours. Many had been postponing health care due to financial hardship. Others just didn’t know where to go for services. The clinic is helping many to enroll in health insurance and to connect with other needed services and programs. Esther Oani, grandmother of two Elsa Widenmann students, says she’s very excited to have the health

center in the community. “I’m really happy for the kids,” says Oani. “Some parents might have trouble keeping up on shots and physicals, but the health center will really help them a lot.” Oani and her grandchildren were among the 21 people who received their H1N1 flu shots on opening day of the health center. (The H1N1 outreach was funded by a mini-grant administered through CSHC, thanks to funding received from the California Primary Care Association, lead agency for the California H1N1 Vaccination Collaborative.) One child in the clinic was recently overheard comforting her younger brother. She told him to stop crying and go back into the exam room to get his shot because “the people in this clinic are very nice.”

For those starting a school health center, Hahn advises them to keep in mind what a benefit it will be to the community. “I’d say to anyone undertaking this process: Persevere; don’t give up!” says Hahn. “And remember how important it is to bring health services to kids in school.”

By Aileen Olson

Started: June 2010

Services: Physicals, Immunizations, Screenings (dental, vision, hearing), Referrals to specialty care, Insurance enrollment assistance

Patients: Children aged 1-18 (Vallejo residents)

Partners: Fighting Back Partnership, United Way of the Bay Area, First 5 Solano, Partnership for Children and Youth, Kaiser Permanente, S.H. Cowell Fdn, McKesson Fdn, Soroptimist Int’l of Vallejo, Solano Community Fdn, Solano Coalition for Better Health, Touro University, Solano Co. Health & Social Services, Planned Parenthood Shasta-Diablo, La Clinica Vallejo, Solano Co. Chapter of Links Inc., Solano Co. Substance Abuse Div., Solano Kids Insurance Program, Glen Price Group, Children’s Nurturing Project

Staff: Nurse Practitioner, Medical Assistant, Volunteer pediatricians, Volunteer medical students, Administrative Staff

Hours: Tuesday & Thursday, 1 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Facility: 2,400 sq. ft. portable on campus; three exam rooms