

Spotlight on: Fresno County Office of Education Mobile Van

Behind the wheel of a full-sized RV that has been converted into a mobile health clinic, Lois Ewert is once again headed down the highway to a rural community an hour away from Fresno. Ewert, a nurse practitioner with the Fresno County Office of Education (FCOE), travels to isolated communities where health services are not easily accessible to students and families. Serving 10 schools in seven school districts, Ewert is on the road a lot. Along with an LVN and health aide, she drives long distances through rain, storms and the infamous valley fog to make her twice monthly visits to all the sites on her route. But it's well worth it to Ewert and her staff when they arrive at a location and find children waiting to be seen for screenings, immunizations and referrals. Over the past school year, Ewert made 162 patient referrals for everything from dental problems to vision issues to mental health and social services needs. "We're mainly a screening clinic," says Ewert. "But I also do many sick child exams and interventions."

The mobile clinic staff also assist patients in finding a primary care provider (PCP) and getting signed up for Medi-Cal or Healthy Families insurance – a daunting process for many. In addition, Ewert and her staff provide valuable support for the wellness programs at the schools they visit by doing height/weight and BMI evaluations for students every fall and spring. Last year, they saw 672 kids and provided the evaluation results to the schools. "These aren't scientific studies by any means," explains Ewert, "but they can provide some useful data to schools who are trying to assess the impact of their wellness programs. We're here to promote wellness, not just run a clinic."

Initially begun by the Fresno Unified School District with First 5 funding, the mobile health clinic was in danger of closing



when funding ran out. That's when the Fresno County Office of Education stepped in. "I really credit our Superintendent and Board for understanding how valuable health services are for the underserved in our school districts," says Barbara Miller, Director of Health Services at FCOE. "They made the decision to use MAA money to keep the van going." Money from the Medi-Cal Administrative Activities (MAA) program funds maintenance of the RV and pays staff salaries. The FCOE mobile health clinic is also a Child Health and Disability Prevention (CHDP) provider.

The RV itself is a standard vehicle that was modified to make the sleeping area in the back into a comfortable and efficient exam room. With pop-out sides, the van expands to make a waiting area where the LVN and health aide can work. The van can accommodate up to three staff and six patients at a time. If necessary, the school lobby can also serve as a waiting room for additional patients and their families. Ewert is very sensitive to patient privacy and makes certain it is always respected. It also helps that a power generator is running and provides cover noise so patient conversations cannot be overheard.

The mobile van is a welcome visitor to the schools it serves. Not only are its services free to students and their families, the clinic also serves school employees and parent volunteers by providing flu shots and TB

skin tests. “Someone once calculated that our services are worth about \$60,000 a year to each school we serve,” says Ewert. “So we feel very welcome and appreciated at all the sites we visit.” Any early resistance from local physicians worried about losing patients melted away quickly when it became clear the mobile clinic staff were connecting patients with a PCP and helping them find a medical home. However, for patients who are unable to see a doctor on their own, the mobile van does provide the services of a physician once a month in Fresno. Besides providing consultations and complete physicals when necessary, the consulting physician also meets monthly with Ewert to review cases and make recommendations.

One recent case Ewert handled was a 3rd grader who had suffered from incontinence for two years. “Nora” had to leave school every day to go home and change her clothes. As a result, she was not doing well in her classes and was socially isolated. With Ewert’s help, she was referred to a physician who identified primary enuresis as the problem. Ewert followed up for months to make sure the child got the proper treatment and medication. With her condition under control, Nora is back in school, making friends and thriving in the classroom. “The impact of what we do is so significant for the socio-emotional development of a child,” says Miller. “Each case like Nora’s has a huge impact on not only the child, but the family and school as well.”

For communities interested in starting a mobile van, Ewert and Miller suggest finding advocates who are willing to go to bat for health services and to explore the feasibility of using MAA money for funding. “You’ll also need staff who are high energy and very flexible with their time,” explains Ewert. “There’s just no way to do this job on an 8 to 5 schedule.” They have also utilized the knowledge and

resources available at CSHC. “The field coordinator in our area has been a great resource for us,” says Miller. “We know anytime a school health center question comes up we can call CSHC. It’s wonderful knowing there are experts out there we can talk to.” The FCOE mobile van has had to work to refine its services and overcome obstacles over the years. But despite the challenges, Ewert and Miller have succeeded in removing barriers that keep kids out of school. “Our goal is to do everything we can to get kids into school and be successful,” says Miller. “Our numbers may not be huge, but for every person we’ve helped, it’s a very big deal.”

By: Aileen Olson

Started: 2005

Sponsor:
Fresno County Office of Education

Facility:
Full-sized mobile van (RV)

Schools served:
10 (1 high school, 9 K-8 schools)

School districts served:
7

Schedule:
1-2 days per month per site
4-5 hours per site

Patients served:
672

Services:
Physical exams, vaccines, flu shots, TB testing, BMI evaluations, H1N1 clinics

Staff:
Nurse practitioner (full-time), LVN (part-time), Health aide (part-time), Consulting physician (part-time)