

Women's Health Center expands care to men, children

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SANTA CRUZ -- In a major expansion of its core mission, the Santa Cruz Women's Health Center announced Monday a multimillion-dollar deal to expand a planned Live Oak satellite into a full-service family clinic open to all.

The \$6.8 million announcement was made jointly with local providers and insurers, and means the women-focused clinic will add thousands of men and children to its rolls for the first time. As one of three federally approved clinics in the county, it also is helping to fill a void expected when thousands of county residents add health coverage under the Jan. 1 full rollout of the Affordable Care Act.

"Our roots are about feminism and equal justice, which is about equal access to care for all, regardless of who they are and their circumstances," said Leslie Conner, executive director of the Women's Health Clinic. "We're now expanding in order to reduce disparities not just for women, but also for men."

As part of the deal, Dominican Hospital will close its 1,600-patient pediatric clinic on Frederick Street and step out of the business of outpatient pediatric care. Those patients will shift to the planned 9,000-square-foot clinic at the current East Cliff Village Shopping Center, part of a major renovation targeted for the East Cliff Drive site.

"We'll continue to serve those children until they're ready to open their doors," said Nanette Mickiewicz, president of Dominican Hospital.

Top executives of several health care companies were joined by Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, to make the announcement outside the Women's Health Center's downtown clinic Monday.

"This movement initiated by the Women's Health Center to bring together the consortium of other health entities is indeed the trend that is needed in the United States," Farr said, noting the House of Representatives just failed in its 40th attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act. "You're doing just the opposite of what Congress is doing right now."

The deal is the result of a number of factors, including seismic safety issues at Dominican's Frederick Street complex that are forcing a number of health care services to either shift locations or close.

Dominican Hospital is pledging \$1.5 million over five years to help operate the clinic, which should help smooth the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. An estimated 9,000 to 11,000 county residents are expected to become eligible for Medi-Cal under a federal expansion that goes into effect in January, with the county readying a major publicity effort to get people to sign up.

In addition, Dominican parent company Dignity Health is pledging a \$2.5 million low-interest loan to help build the clinic. The Palo Alto Medical Foundation and the Sutter Maternity & Surgery

Center also are pledging \$1.5 million, and several other groups are pledging smaller amounts. The clinic also secured a large federal grant for expanded patient services.

As part of the deal, current Dominican pediatric clinic director Dr. Salem Magarian will join the staff of the new Live Oak clinic, which does not have a name yet. The downtown Women's Health Center will continue normal operations.

Alan McKay, chief executive officer of the Central California Alliance for Health, and Larry DeGhetaldi, president of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Santa Cruz, were also on hand for the announcement. So was Gloria Nieto, a Women's Health Center board member who is also a patient.

"I am one of those people whose life was literally saved here because of the medical care I was able to get," Nieto said. "I'm really excited that we're able to widen the area of people (served) – including the new Latino families that were not served over in the Live Oak area."

The Women's Health Center expansion is one of numerous health care-related projects across Santa Cruz County, most a direct result of the Affordable Care Act. The county is expanding facilities in Santa Cruz and Watsonville, Dientes Community Dental Clinic is adding to its Mid-County location and Salud Para la Gente is expanding to serve 2,000 more patients.

The county also plans to open a new mental health center on Jan. 1.

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