

Packed and ready to go

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Free clinic gives students a leg up heading into school

August 19, 2021

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SYSTEM—Interns with Westminster Free Clinic attach wristbands to children who will receive backpacks. The clinic gave wristbands to 235 children, and the wristband was cut off by volunteers after the child chose a backpack. ASHLEY MOWREADER/Acorn Newspapers

Going back to school means getting back to the basics. Westminster Free Clinic hosted its annual back-to-school wellness fair Aug. 11, providing over 1,600 backpacks for the community and 35 special gifts for its high school interns.

Westminster is a health services provider for eastern Ventura County, serving the disadvantaged communities of Thousand Oaks and Simi Valley. The event provided local families with opportunities to receive dental services, healthy food, gently used clothing and books, COVID-19 vaccines as well as backpacks and school supplies.

“Our philosophy is helping kids get equipped to succeed,” clinic volunteer Bruce Polkes said. “We believe having an education is the foundation to success, and in order to get off to a strong start, they need the tools to do so.”

Laptops for interns

The Conejo Valley Unified School District provides laptops for students to use, but the school leased Chromebooks that many receive do not allow for offline work, meaning a student must be connected to the internet to do their homework.



A mother and her son wait in line for the wristband to be cut off. The clinic encouraged social distancing by allowing only five people or two families at a time to select backpacks. ASHLEY MOWREADER/Acorn Newspapers

Students living in homes without consistent or any Wi-Fi access face unique challenges, which is why the clinic made it a priority to provide its interns with MacBook Pros.

As a result, the teens will be able to work offline now and take their computer with them to college, clinic Executive Director Lisa Safaeinili said.

“The first thing students need to succeed is the right tools to show what they know,” Safaeinili said. “The second is hope. Receiving a laptop and school supplies makes both possible.”

Interns who received computers were selected based on the level of economic need as

well as their commitment and dedication to helping their community through the free clinic.

Interns apply for the position and commit to serving weekly for two years, Safaeinili said. All interns are local high schoolers who want to work in healthcare, many striving to be doctors, physician assistants or nurses.

The internship gives them hands-on experience and the opportunity to serve the community and develop “soft” skills like leadership and relationship-building, Safaeinili said.

After 20 years of overseeing the intern program, Safaeinili has dozens of stories about interns who have gone on to be top of their class, making hundreds of thousands of dollars after graduation. All it took, she said, was the chance to succeed.

Backpacks for back-to-school

Polkes is one of a handful of volunteers who help fundraise, collect and package backpacks for the annual event. Polkes and his wife, Alysa, get help from fellow volunteers Faye and Fred Miran, Ursula Doidic and Safaeinili in organizing and distributing the bags.

Last year, the volunteers collected 933 backpacks, which they handed out in a drive-thru event due to pandemic restrictions. This year, Alysa Polkes said, they were excited to get to see the families face-to-face (or mask-to-mask, as the clinic is a healthcare setting and requires masking). The group handed out 1,100 backpacks at the Thousand Oaks event and an additional 600 in Oxnard.

The pandemic put extra stress on low-income families trying to do school from home, making this fall the most important year for the event because students lost more, Fred Miran said.

“We upped the numbers (of backpacks) and tried to reach out to more financially challenged families,” he said.

Families worked their way through the event, some guided by a checklist in Spanish, and those who opted to receive a vaccine or a fluoride dental treatment got first pick of the backpacks later in the evening.

The bags came in a variety of colors and sizes with school supplies for all ages, including a ruler, pens and pencils, glue sticks and a notebook.

Each family left with a package of printer paper as well.

Back-to-school shopping included books and clothes at the wellness fair. Children could grab as many gently used books as they wanted, and families could select up to 10 individually wrapped clothing items.

The clothing was labeled in English and Spanish, denoting size and the article of clothing. Volunteers said they arrived with over 700 pieces of clothing and only a handful remained at the end of the night.

Community partners helped make the event a success: the United Way of Ventura County, Ventura County Public Health, Gold Coast Health Plan, Colgate, the Student Corps, the Kiwanis Club, Food Share, the Bookworm Project, the United Methodist Church of Thousand Oaks, the nurses union, Lightshine, more than 600 medical and non-medical volunteers, and clinic donors.