

NEIGHBORS

ACORN SERIES // *Pandemic pros*



Photos by DAWN MEGLI/Acorn Newspapers

TEAM EFFORT—Thousand Oaks resident and pharmacy technician Kevin McCaffery prepares prescriptions for Westminster Free Clinic’s medicine dispensary.

Through thick and thin

Editor’s note: As Thousand Oaks begins the process of moving beyond the coronavirus, we’ll spend the next few weeks highlighting some of the many people and organizations that stepped up during the pandemic.

By Dawn Megli
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On a recent Wednesday, they started lining up under a gray spring sky at the makeshift medical clinic. Some came one by one. Some came two by two. Others walked up with their arms linked.

As volunteers in blue and burgundy scrubs performed intake interviews and measured patients’ blood pressure in the church lobby underneath stained-glass windows and a blue banner reading “Faith Hope Love” dozens



HOUSING HELP—Operations manager Cynthia Soto helps a client apply for federal rent relief. Westminster volunteers are trying to help as many people as possible catch up on back rent before the federal eviction moratorium expires at the end of June.

and pharmacists. They perform blood pressure and blood sugar screenings. When the pandemic started, they offered COVID

antibody testing.

The clinic helps people apply for a federal rental assistance

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Free Clinic

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program, Housing is Key.

“People fall through the crack in California because of the high cost of living,” said Lisa Safaeinili, executive director of the clinic. “We’re an upstream solution to homelessness. If people are well they can work, they can pay rent. Being healthy is the first thing before anything else because 50% of homelessness is caused by a health event.”

Last year the clinic provided nearly 8,000 medical visits, administered 5,500 prescriptions, gave food to over 11,000 families and arranged 2,400 mental health visits.

Though the clinic is held at United Methodist Church of Thousand Oaks, it is not a religious organization. But for those who receive assistance there, it can feel like salvation.

Case manager Brianda Montelongo, 28, said a woman with no health insurance brought in her nonverbal autistic son. The clinic discovered he needed \$30,000 in dental work, which its dentists were able to arrange at no charge.

“Now he can eat,” Montelongo said. “It was emotional for the mom.”

Operations manager Cynthia Soto helps clients apply for rental



DAWN MEGLI/Acorn Newspapers

VITAL STATS—Volunteer Eric Villes, an emergency medical technician, takes the blood pressure of a client during the intake procedure at Westminster Free Clinic.

and utility assistance. She said some people need help with as much as \$20,000 in back rent. The clinic is trying to help as many people as possible catch up on rent before the federal eviction moratorium expires at the end of June.

“People come to us for a sign of hope. They come to us sometimes crying. We try to help as much as we can,” said Soto, a 25-year-old Camarillo resident.

Moorpark College student Emely Cuellar, who has volunteered at the clinic for five years, wore a sweatshirt that said “Treat People with Kindness” as she helped patients in the church hall.

She said the clinic tries to diagnose chronic issues, like diabetes and high blood pressure, to prevent them from becoming worse. She said having bilingual staff puts clients at ease.

“I see the relief in their faces when they’re able to communicate with us to receive the care they need,” the 18-year-old said.

In mid-April, Cal State Channel Islands nursing student Itzely Valadez, 23, handed out bags of fresh produce and other healthy foods to families in line for the drive-thru distribution. Alongside her was Conejo Valley High School student and clinic volunteer Anneth Carrillo. Anneth, 16, said her family depended on the clinic when she was growing up, and now, as she performs bilingual volunteer work, she is considering a career in healthcare.

That’s how the clinic is working to shorten the line. They have a two-year high school internship program where 170 students, half of whom come from families who have used services at the clinic, gain work experience.

Safaeinili said children who grew up in Spanish-speaking homes with no cars or computers often go on to become college graduates and work as nurses and other medical professionals making upward of \$80,000 a year.

“They’ll never need a free clinic,” Safaeinili said. “When you give kids a chance to dream and believe it’s possible for them, they will rise to the occasion.”

In the suburbs of eastern Ventura County, the high cost of living is a burden for many.

The poverty threshold for a family of four is \$35,500 a year

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