



Miguel Garcia, 59, of Santa Paula, lets Dr. Michael Stelman look at his foot at the Westminster Free Clinic at El Buen Pastor United Methodist Church in Santa Paula on Thursday. The free clinic with locations in Thousand Oaks and Oxnard has expanded to Santa Paula. PHOTOS BY JUAN CARLO/THE STAR

Westminster Free Clinic expands to Santa Paula, serves uninsured people

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Silvia Flores of Santa Paula didn't have to travel far to check her blood sugar at the Westminster Free Clinic on Thursday. Flores, 49, was one of 12 people who took advantage of the free clinic that recently started once-a-month events at a Santa Paula church. She has visited the Thousand Oaks location before but was pleased to see one closer to home.

"It's much better," said Flores, a stay-at-home mother who would recommend the clinic to her friends. "I like the way they help people and look at the patients."

Located at El Buen Pastor United Methodist Church at 1029 E. Santa Paula St., the clinic is for uninsured people who cannot afford healthcare.

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Students from Santa Paula High School interview patients about their health at the Westminster Free Clinic at El Buen Pastor United Methodist Church in Santa Paula on Thursday. The free health clinic includes medical career training for high school students.

Clinic

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Westminster Free Clinic, a longtime presence in the Conejo Valley, expanded to Oxnard in 2020 and serves about 14,000 patients. It offers diagnostic tests, physician visits, case management and mental health services. No donations are requested.

The Santa Paula site, first launched on Sept. 21, opens at 4:30 p.m. every third Thursday of the month. Stations are set up for doctors to work and patients to get their blood pressure or weight checked. Afterward, the stations are removed until the next clinic.

As the clinic grows in popularity, more days and services will be added, said Lisa Safaeinili, Westminster's executive director.

Westminster Free Clinic received \$1.5 million in state funds last year to serve Ventura County's low-income community and it helped open the new clinic, Safaeinili said. The funding must be spent at the three clinics by June 2024, she said.

Dr. Michael Stelman, a general physician who retired from private practice in January and lives in Ventura, was one of two doctors who volunteered their time to help patients when the clinic opened in September.

On Thursday, five doctors came to help out, including Stelman.



From left, AudriRose Riggattire, Silvia Flores and Arely Garza take care of patient Flores by checking her height and weight at the Westminster Free Clinic in Santa Paula Thursday. The free health clinic recently expanded operations to Santa Paula. JUAN CARLO/THE STAR

"I think the community is still learning that we're here so the volume is building gradually," Stelman said. "We'll stay until the last patient is here."

On Thursday, Flores sat in line with her boyfriend Miguel Garcia, 59, of Thousand Oaks, who was having skin issues on his foot. She said she had waited two hours for care in Thousand Oaks but the wait was about 30 minutes in Santa Paula.

The clinic also offers opportunities for students who want to learn more about health care. Santa Paula High School and college students assist doctors and nurses with gathering data and talking to patients. The high school students translate Spanish to English for doctors.

Karina Arana, 21, a Santa Paula resident, attends Moorpark College and is studying nursing. Arana, who shadowed 24-year-old Ventura resident Thomas Harvey at the clinic, said it was important to have medical services in her hometown.

"It feels good knowing they're trying to help out the community," she said. "It's giving people the opportunity to get help and provide for those that don't have insurance."

Thousand Oaks resident Marco Ruiz, 23, started working with the free clinic in 2015 as a student at Westlake High School. He graduated from CSU Channel Islands in nursing earlier this year and is applying his skills at the clinic.

"It's really nice to see how much it's grown over time," said Ruiz, who remembered there was only the Thousand Oaks location when he started. "I like being a resource for the underserved communities."

He said his prior experience at the clinic made him want to study nursing.

"When I started, I wasn't sure what I wanted to go into," Ruiz said. "It helped steer me in the right direction and guide me into a career. Shadowing the nurses here really helped a lot."

Santa Paula High School student Virginia Valladolid, 16, who wants to become a surgeon, said she enjoys translating patients' needs to nurses and others at the clinic.

"I really love helping people," Valladolid said, "and it will really benefit me."

Safaeinili said the clinic will grow and they hope to see it become as successful as the Thousand Oaks and Oxnard locations.

Santa Paula's clinic will return at 4:30 p.m. on Dec. 21 and continue the third Thursday of every month.

For more information on the program, visit westminsterclinic.org.

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