

Pleasanton: New low-income health clinic opens

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The Mercury News

Posted: Tue May 10 15:52:31 MDT 2016

PLEASANTON -- Low-income and uninsured patient care provider Axis Community Health has opened a new clinic that will allow it to increase the number of Tri-Valley residents it serves to 20,000 from its current 12,000 at the group's other two clinics.

One of Axis' focal points is serving the medical and mental health needs of those on California's MediCal insurance system through the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare. They also take patients with private plans as well as those who can't afford health insurance.

The 24,000-square-foot facility, a renovated office condo in the Hacienda Business Park, will add 27 exam rooms, seven counseling rooms, a pharmacy, health education classroom and blood laboratory to Axis' capacity. It's two other clinics in Pleasanton and Livermore have 22 exam rooms combined -- not enough space to meeting the Tri-Valley's growing need for low-income health care services. According to Axis' own research, more than 20,000 people in the area are in need of its services.

"Our mission is to serve anybody who needs health care -- especially people on MediCal," says Axis CEO Sue Compton. She points out that because MediCal reimburses doctors at such a low rate, many will not accept patients with the plan. Founded in 1972, Axis has always taken MediCal. It also has a sliding fee structure for uninsured patients who don't qualify for MediCal but can't afford private health insurance. "We'll serve anybody."

With the increased capacity, Axis plans on hiring seven more physicians. It is also considering adding dental care facilities.

Axis covered the \$12 million cost of its new facility in a variety of ways. These included funds provided by Alameda County as well as Dublin, Livermore, Pleasanton and the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department and \$6 million from the California Endowment and Capital Impact Partners. The Northern California Community Loan Fund provided money to buy the property.

Axis also raised \$1.7 million for construction through fundraising. Major donors include Kaiser Permanente, the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Stanford Health Care-ValleyCare and Fremont Bank Foundation. Axis is working to raise another \$300,000 for medical equipment.

According to the clinic, the medical approach Axis takes is to not just treat symptoms, but to look at all underlying behaviors that could cause problems such as substance abuse, diet, lifestyle and mental health issues. For instance, if someone comes in complaining about a persistent headache and it's discovered the patient also suffers from depression or has an alcohol problem, doctors will take the patient to see a counselor on-site for those issues.

Known as the Patient-Centered Medical Home model and befitting this approach, osteopathic Dr. Dawnell Moody has been tapped to head the new clinic. Osteopaths look at everything that could affect their patients from their family life to the environment they live in.

"Osteopaths are taught to think more out of the box," says Moody, who received her degree from Western University of Health Sciences and is a board-certified pediatrician. She's been with Axis since 2014.

Moody, who lives in Livermore with her husband and two children, wants to focus on childhood obesity. One way she'd like to encourage healthier eating habits among low-income kids is to establish a program so that Tri-Valley's farmers markets accept food stamps or EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards. This would make it easier to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Because the area often is characterized as affluent, the need for low-income health care services in the Tri-Valley may not register with many, but it exists.

"What's interesting is that like many suburban populations, poverty is hidden (in the area)," says Axis board member James Paxson. He points to a recent book about the phenomenon called "Confronting Suburban Poverty" by Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube of the Brookings Institution. Some of their research for the book focused on poverty in eastern Contra Costa County.

The reason suburban poverty is easily ignored, says Paxson, referring to the book's findings, is that unlike poor neighborhoods in

big cities that tend to be in one area and therefore more noticeable, suburban poverty is more diffused. "People don't think about it because they don't see large concentrations of it," says Paxson.

One area Paxson is proud of is Axis' efforts to keep low-income patients from going to the emergency room for medical problems that should have been addressed far earlier in a doctor's office visit -- one they can afford with Axis' help.

Axis will unveil its new digs at 5925 W. Las Positas Blvd. with a grand opening celebration May 21 from 1 to 3:30 p.m. featuring presentations by U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell and Alameda County Supervisors Nate Miley and Scott Haggerty. Tours of the building will follow. To attend, RSVP by calling 925-201-6017.

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