HEALTH + BEHAVIOR

UCLA volunteers provide free health care at downtown L.A. mega clinic

Care Harbor clinic offered essential basic services to those in need

Amy Albin and Enrique Rivero | January 03, 2018

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UCLA medical student Ken Kitayama volunteers at Care Harbor's free clinic.

With the strongly held belief that access to health care should be available to everyone — not just the insured — nearly 200 volunteers from UCLA joined an effort to provide free services to more than 2,000 people at a three-day Care Harbor community clinic.

"Los Angeles is still one of the leading areas of people without insurance or access to care and it's a problem for the community," said Dr. Patrick Dowling, professor and chair of the UCLA Department of Family Medicine, who led the UCLA volunteer contingent at Care Harbor's seventh health care mega clinic. "I'm involved with this because I know there's an unmet need. I want to demonstrate to our medical students we have a responsibility to be down here."

Care Harbor is a charity that provides free medical, dental and vision care to the underinsured and underserved. The clinic drew 2,047 professionals and students to offer their clinical expertise. Those volunteers included 198 people from UCLA Health, the UCLA School of Dentistry, the UCLA Stein Eye Institute and the UCLA School of Nursing. There were 2,151 people who sought services at the clinic, which was held at the Reef Event Center in downtown Los Angeles from Nov. 17–19.

Dr. Karla Gonzalez, a third-year family medicine resident at UCLA, grew up near downtown Los Angeles in Boyle Heights. She had previously participated in the Care Harbor event when she was a medical student and, before that, as an interpreter.

"I've always believed in giving back to my community. This event exemplifies what we as a strong community can do," Gonzalez said. "We do it for each other and we get as much out of it as the patients. It's just a way to provide services and fulfill the duty that we're all called to do."

Dr. Idalberto Zaldivar Galvez, a physician from Cuba who is enrolled in the UCLA International Medical Graduate Program, volunteered as a Spanish-language interpreter.

"To be a doctor you must have human feelings," he said. "So for me it's very comfortable to help people to improve their condition, their illnesses."

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Jessica Maganda, a recent graduate of the UCLA School of Nursing and Daisy Lopez, a UCLA nursing student at Care Harbor's seventh free mega clinic.

Most of the people who visited the family medicine section of the clinic had conditions such as high blood pressure, asthma or diabetes, which can be well-controlled with proper care. This year, Care Harbor focused on two initiatives directly impacting public health in Los Angeles County — a pilot program to identify and treat medical issues early among people who are homeless, and a Hepatitis A vaccination effort. There has been a recent outbreak of Hepatitis A in Los Angeles County.

"We saw homeless patients and patients with no insurance. They were of all ages with all types of difficulties, said Jo-Ann Eastwood, an associate professor of nursing and director of the advanced practice program in the nursing school. "We did preventive education while assessing patients to make sure they got the tests they need. If the tests were not available at Care Harbor, we then made sure they got a referral to a community clinic."

Eastwood added that the volunteer experience of working with patients from underserved backgrounds was valuable for UCLA nursing students, who typically only see people with health insurance coverage.

Dental services were popular at the event, with approximately 1,325 people seeking care. Some health coverage plans do not include dental care. UCLA's dental school was one of several organizations that offered cleanings, fillings, extractions, partial dentures, oral cancer screenings and root canal surgery.

"Being able to work alongside fellow faculty members as well as exposing residents and pre-doctoral students to this worthwhile event is something I look forward to year after year, said Dr. Edmond Hewlett, professor of restorative dentistry and associate dean for outreach and diversity at UCLA. "Providing quality dental care to the community is among the dental school's most important priorities and Care Harbor provides a perfect avenue to fulfill our mission."

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About 900 people visited the vision care clinic. Frank Gulli, a 66-year-old who lives in senior housing in Hollywood and has a fixed income, has attended Care Harbor the past five years specifically to get an eye exam. Gulli said he has glaucoma, which can damage the optic nerve, and was told he needs annual exams to help protect his sight. Gulli had his vision checked and then saw an ophthalmologist from the UCLA Stein Eye Institute who dilated his eyes. Afterward, he picked out a new pair of eyeglasses.

"I'm a big fan of Care Harbor and it's a big plus for the community," Gulli said. "The people are wonderful and very professional."

Nora Meza came for a dental cleaning and to see a chiropractor for back, shoulder and neck discomfort.

"This event is very important for those of us who sometimes don't have the means to go to a doctor and get regular health care or dental," said Meza, who is legally blind. "A lot