Spirit on Display at Care Harbor Event

Long Beach Comprehensive Health Center Pharmacy staff prepare boxes of prepackaged medications for Care Harbor event

The line that circled around the building before dawn could have been mistaken for eager Christmas shoppers camping out for a big screen TV or holiday bargain. They were young and old, from every background, and from every part of the County. But the lines of wheelchairs and walkers suggested this was no ordinary shopping event. They were there in search of a gift, the gift of good health.

Over four days in September, more than 4,000 people lined up to receive free health care at the massive Care Harbor event staged at the Los Angeles Sports Arena. The annual event has become a familiar and poignant reminder of the tens of thousands of County residents who are unable to receive regular health care because they have no insurance, few means, or both.

Participants lined up in droves for eyeglasses, mammograms, immunizations, and dental work. Some were diabetic, or battled cancer and heart disease. Many had postponed care altogether or stopped taking their medications because they could not afford them. Most had a diagnosed or undiagnosed ailment requiring attention.

"This event brings into focus the tremendous unmet need in Los Angeles County for basic health care," says consultant and Care Harbor board member Carol Meyer, who helped coordinate the involvement of the Department of Health Services (DHS), which provided teams of clinical staff, interpreters, prescription drugs, and medical supplies.

For those needing ongoing care, DHS volunteers were on hand to provide linkages to community clinics and services. One woman showed up complaining of stomach pain and was diagnosed with a large abdominal mass. Health Services providers were able to schedule surgery at Olive View-UCLA Medical Center for her within days.

DHS volunteers also signed up eligible participants for coverage programs like Healthy Way L.A., which provides medical coverage and other benefits for low income, uninsured adults between 19 and 64 years old. Pharmacists and technicians from the Long Beach Comprehensive Health Center packaged thousands of bottles of medications for the event, and DHS interpreters provided essential translation services.

An estimated 50 million Americans live without health care. Having no or inadequate health insurance often means that people will postpone necessary care and forego preventive care. Because the uninsured and underinsured frequently have no regular doctor and limited access to prescription medications, they are more likely to be hospitalized for health conditions that could be avoided. With thousands of people under one roof, organizers use the event to provide valuable prevention and wellness information geared to underserved communities.

Event organizers say early diagnosis and intervention allows patients to be treated before diseases reach a critical and costly phase that overloads community resources. Correcting vision and dental problems can increase employability, and the volume of free care delivered at the clinic reduces the impact on area Emergency Rooms and wait times for emergency care.

Care Harbor is made possible by the generosity and participation of supporters, including medical and dental schools, hospitals and clinics, professional organizations, foundations, government agencies, corporations and private individuals. In addition to funding from Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, other major financial sponsors for this year's event included L.A. Care and Dignity Health. To volunteer, visit www.careharbor.org.