LA 10/20/2011 07:16 pm ET | **Updated** Dec 20, 2011

Free Medical Clinic In Los Angeles: Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas Comes Out Swinging

By Anna Almendrala

LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas came out swinging Thursday morning against opponents of President Obama's Affordable Care Act.

Speaking at a press conference on the first day of the CareNow LA free medical clinic, a yearly event that he champions, Ridley-Thomas apologized to fellow speakers on the stage before calling out those who have "gotten it twisted" about the new healthcare law.

"I don't mean to deeply politicize this, but I can't help myself, darnit," said Ridley-Thomas before issuing a challenge to those who would repeal federal coverage for the underinsured and uninsured.

> *What about the need for healthcare don't you get? What is your solution to what has got to be seen as a crisis? And furthermore, stand in these lines and tell the people who are here seeking care, that you wish to deny them the opportunity to feel better and reach their full potential.*

Los Angeles currently has 2.2 million uninsured residents.

Those "lines" Ridley-Thomas referenced encompassed thousands of Angelenos who waited for hours Monday to receive a wristband that would grant them access to the free clinic, which is run on a completely voluntary basis by both event organizers and medical professionals. The 5,000 who were lucky enough to snap one up are expected to come in daily waves of approximately 1,200 people across four days.

According to a press release from CareNow LA, those with a wristband will be offered dental, medical and vision care — as well as a few boutique treatments like acupuncture and meditation. It took 3,200 healthcare volunteers from over 100 organizations to set up and staff these clinics, and the organization is still on the hunt for more dentists and dental hygienists.

One of those volunteers, Dr. Charles Best of the USC Institute of Urology, said that his experience volunteering in Haiti a year after the earthquake was similar to serving the uninsured of Los Angeles.

"Just like in third world situations like Haiti," Best explained to The Huffington Post, "a lot of people don't have regular access to care or are too busy trying to scrape by that they tend to ignore the health problems they may have."

Ignoring health problems can result in a person seeking treatment for a serious ailment that could have been more easily cured at an earlier stage in the disease.

"Despite us being this lovely, democratic, capitalist society," Best added, "there's still a lot of our population that has trouble getting their basic needs met."

The center of the Sports Arena where the clinic is located was packed with rows of dental chairs, surrounded by hundreds who waited in stadium seating for their turn with a dentist. Salvador Arias, who lost his job at a printing press six months ago, was waiting in line to have three teeth removed and a loose filling taken care of. As he sat waiting, he admitted to The Huffington Post, "it's kind of scary" knowing he's going to walk out of the arena with three less teeth.

Vannessa Prince, a cosmetology student with no dental insurance, waited across the floor for a root canal.

"In August, I paid for a dental x-ray," Prince explained to The Huffington Post, "but they said it was going to be $900 to take care of one tooth." She decided to wait for CareNow LA's clinic, reasoning, "Hey, it's free here!"

Prince then introduced her friend Brooke Collins, who had just had some wisdom teeth removed.

"She got four removed," said Prince, but Collins corrected her. "No, just two. I got my other two removed for free at last year's clinic."

Registered dental hygienist Julie Dao shared with The Huffington Post that she had just helped someone who hadn't had a professional cleaning in ten years.

"If we had more of these [free clinics] we'd be in better shape," Dao admitted, but she's not discouraged at the state of health care in Los Angeles, with its over 2 million uninsured. "I just try to think about it as helping one person at a time."

Anna Almendrala 🐦
Healthy Living Editor