

HEALTH

Hundreds line up at Los Angeles Sports Arena for free medical, dental care



A patient receives an eye exam during while visiting the free health clinic at the Los Angeles Sports Arena September 11, 2014. Care Harbor LA kicked off its annual 4-day free healthcare clinic for the uninsured and underinsured Thursday morning. The event is the largest free-care event in the United State, with hundreds of doctors, dentists, optometrists, nurses and ...

PHOTOS: Free health clinic at the LA Memorial Sports Arena

EXPOSITION PARK >> Sergio Sparza, a tall, husky man, suffered from a small yet biting pain.

He was missing a front tooth.

“It affects me psychologically and spiritually,” the 38-year-old man from East L.A. said without a smile.

So when Sparza walked into the [Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena](#) early Thursday morning, it was as if he had stumbled through the pearly white gates of dental heaven.

That’s because the nearly 17,000-seat Sports Arena [had been transformed](#) into [a massive medical, dental and vision clinic](#), where hundreds of dentists, [optometrists](#), pediatricians, nurses and other volunteers were waiting to care for Sparza and the thousands like him who either are uninsured or underinsured and in need of free dental work, glasses and more.

At least 4,000 people are expected to visit the Sports Arena through Sunday, said Don Manelli, the president and founder of Care Harbor, a nonprofit organization that produced the large-scale health clinic. Those who needed the services of Care Harbor LA were asked to pick up wristbands days before, to determine which day they could be seen.

On Thursday patients with green wristbands stood in line before dawn, grateful and eager for an aching tooth or two to be filled or pulled, or a new pair of bifocals to be made for free.

A similar event was held at the Los Angeles Forum in 2009, one of the largest such clinics in the nation. About 6,000 people attended but many had to be turned away then. Images of those megaclinics, held nationwide and primarily in rural settings, became symbolic of the fractured health care system before reform and the lengths many Americans would take for much needed medical and dental care.

Though the Affordable Care Act is now into a full year of implementation, Manelli said needs remain, even among the newly insured.

“There are plenty of patients now and there will be plenty of patients in the future,” Manelli said. “Our goal is to make ourselves obsolete. But we’re not there yet.”

Nearly 401,000 L.A. County residents chose an insurance plan within the first six-month enrollment period, through [Covered California](#), the state’s Affordable Care Act health plan exchange. The figures show a majority — 87 percent — were eligible for financial subsidies.

“The Affordable Care Act is working and it will be a success but our work isn’t done yet,” said Howard Kahn, chief executive officer of L.A. Care Health Plan, which sponsored the event and worked with the office of Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas and numerous health organizations.

Kahn said at least 1.3million people in Los Angeles County remain uninsured, which means many still need medical, dental and vision care.

Part of the reason that Care Harbor continues to see patients is because community clinics are sending them to the event for the free care, said Dr. Natalie Nevins, who oversees the medical services for Care Harbor.

“We now have more people insured but we’re discovering that community clinics are struggling,” she said. “They’re struggling to offer subspecialty care.”

As a result, this year the event is offering specialty services such as echocardiograms, gynecological ultrasounds, podiatry and dermatology, Nevins said. Oral cancer screenings will be conducted and biopsies can even be collected.

Luis Garcia, 29, said he slept in his car in the parking lot of the Sports Arena so that he could be seen. The Sun Valley resident, who is uninsured, said he was the seventh person in line Thursday morning. His teeth were cleaned and a cavity filled.

“This was a really good opportunity,” he said. “I feel good.”

Diana Linares, an Inglewood resident, said while most of her basic health needs are covered under Medi-Cal, the government-subsidized health insurance, glasses are not.

Linares is partially sighted in one eye and suffers from photophobia, or a sensitivity to light. She wears dark glasses when she’s outside but said she’d like a pair of bifocals.

“I’ve never had a pair,” the 39-year-old woman said. “I’d like to have them so I can try to read again.”

Sparza, the man with the missing front tooth, said he too is covered under Medi-Cal, but he isn’t covered for dental work, especially for an expensive new tooth.

Dr. Dean Ramus, a Beverly Hills-based dentist who specializes in prosthodontics and who was volunteering his services Thursday, said making a new front tooth for Sparza isn’t easy in an arena setting. Sparza wouldn’t be able to get his new partial until Sunday, Ramus said.

“It’s worth it,” an enthusiastic Sparza said, offering up a grateful, closed-mouth smile. “I have to take advantage of this.”



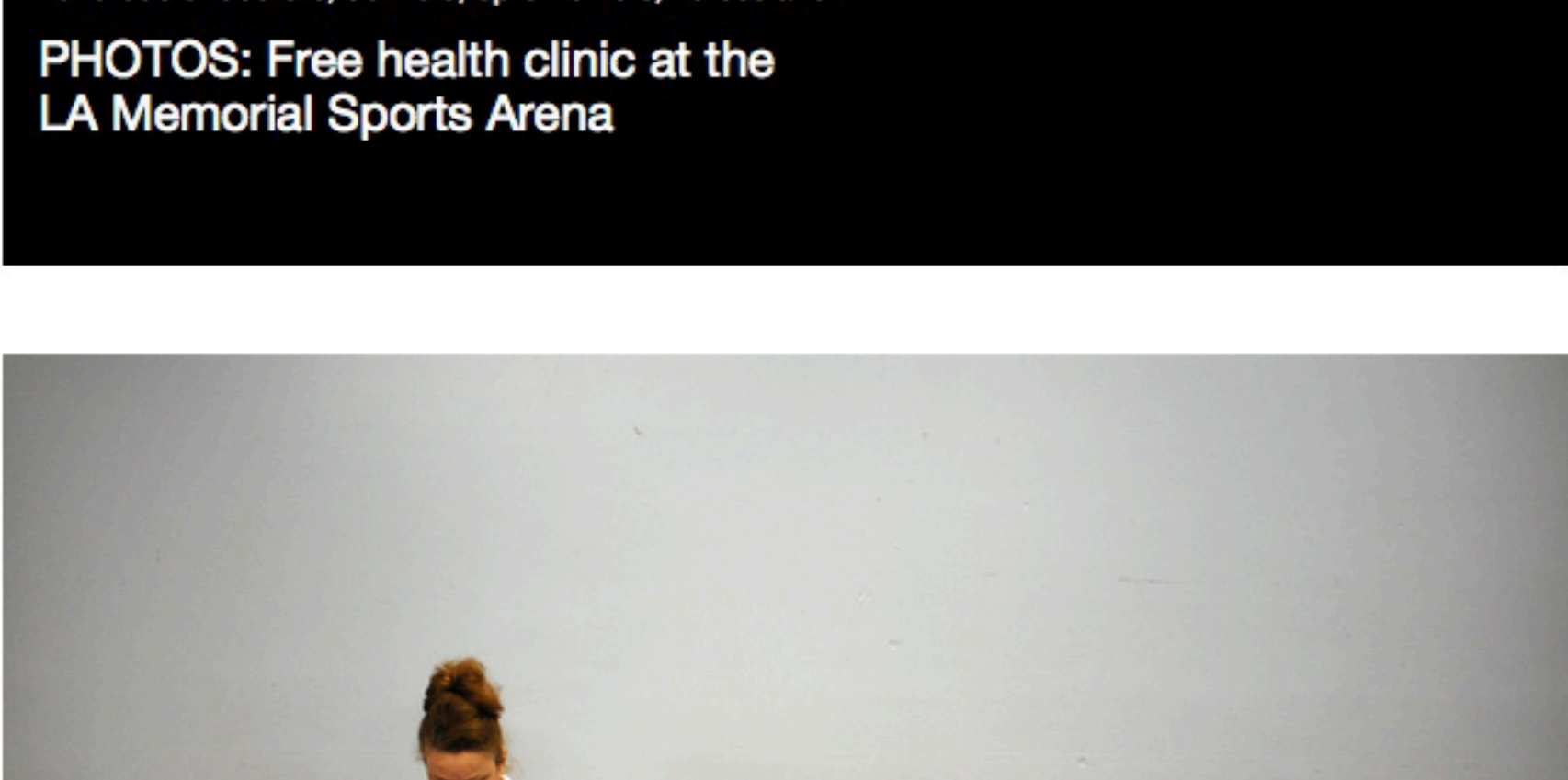
Patients receive dental care during the free health clinic at the Los Angeles Sports Arena September 11, 2014. Care Harbor LA kicked off its annual 4-day free healthcare clinic for the uninsured and underinsured Thursday morning. The event is the largest free-care event in the United State, with hundreds of doctors, dentists, optometrists, nurses and volunteers ...

PHOTOS: Free health clinic at the LA Memorial Sports Arena



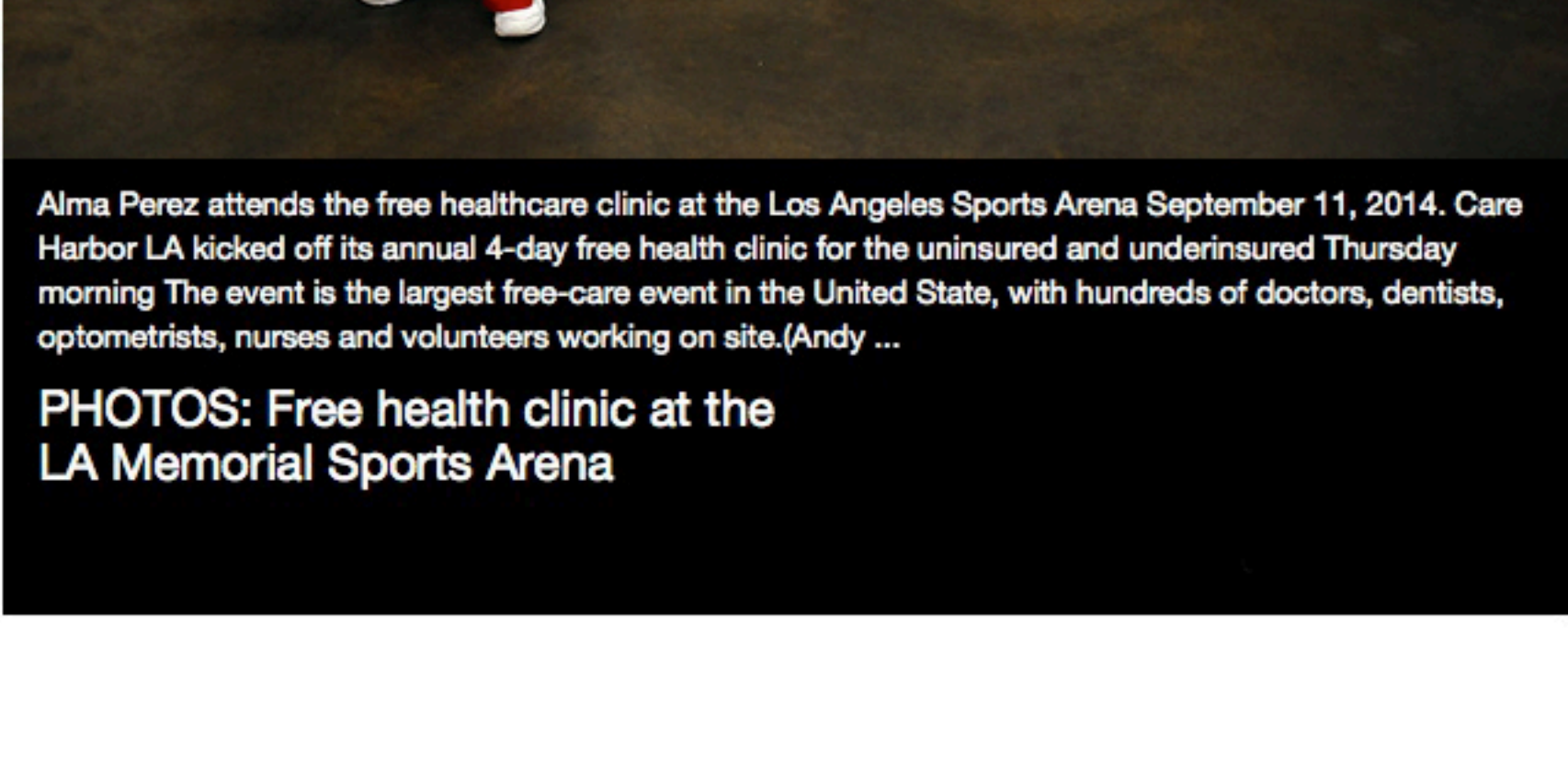
People wait in line to receive medical treatment during the free health clinic at the Los Angeles Sports Arena September 11, 2014. Care Harbor LA kicked off its annual 4-day free healthcare clinic for the uninsured and underinsured Thursday morning. The event is the largest free-care event in the United State, with hundreds of doctors, dentists, optometrists, nurses ...

PHOTOS: Free health clinic at the LA Memorial Sports Arena



Luis Garcia receives a fluoride treatment during the free healthcare clinic at the Los Angeles Sports Arena September 11, 2014. Care Harbor LA kicked off its annual 4-day free health clinic for the uninsured and underinsured Thursday morning. The event is the largest free-care event in the United State, with hundreds of doctors, dentists, optometrists, nurses and volunteers working on site.(Andy ...

PHOTOS: Free health clinic at the LA Memorial Sports Arena



Alma Perez attends the free healthcare clinic at the Los Angeles Sports Arena September 11, 2014. Care Harbor LA kicked off its annual 4-day free health clinic for the uninsured and underinsured Thursday morning. The event is the largest free-care event in the United State, with hundreds of doctors, dentists, optometrists, nurses and volunteers working on site.(Andy ...

PHOTOS: Free health clinic at the LA Memorial Sports Arena