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MARIN COMMUNITY CLINICS



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Dr. Tonya Watson gives Lesly Reyes, 11, of San Rafael, an eye exam at the Marin Community Clinics in San

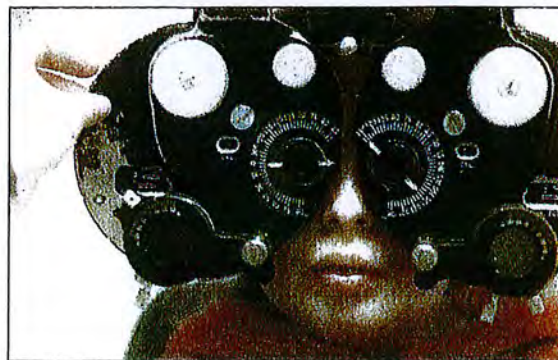
Low income, uninsured get access to eye care

By Richard Halstead
Marin Independent Journal

Low-income and uninsured Marin residents now have a new option when seeking eye care.

Marin Community Clinics — in partnership with the University of California, Berkeley School of Optometry and the county of Marin — opened its first optometry clinic last week.

Marin Community Clinics, a nonprofit



Lesly Reyes, 11, of San Rafael, sits for an eye exam at the Marin Community Clinic in San Rafael.

that provides medical care for Marin's economically disadvantaged and uninsured population, treated 32,000 patients in fis-

cal year 2011.

"Optometry is a service that we always wanted to offer because patients really need it," said Linda Tavaszi, Marin Community Clinics' chief executive. Patients will be charged on a sliding scale; but no one will be turned away.

The clinic is staffed by Dr. Tonya Watson, a member of the UC Berkeley School of Optometry's clinical

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faculty, who oversees two optometry residents. The clinic is open on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Watson said there are a number of conditions of the eye, such as glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy, in which patients have no indication there is anything wrong until it is too late.

"Once the retina has been damaged, it can't come back," Watson said. "That is why rou-

tine care is important, especially in the diabetic population."

Tavaszi said, "We also see a lot of children. If you don't correct children's problems early, they can become much more difficult to correct."

Watson said clinics that serve low-income residents do a relatively good job meeting the basic medical needs of their patients; but she said they often find it difficult to provide access to medical spe-

cialists such as optometrists.

Tavaszi said Marin Community Clinics has clinicians — doctors or nurse practitioners — on staff who do primary care, obstetrics, behavioral health and pediatrics. Specialty care at the clinic, however, is provided by medical volunteers. And, Tavaszi said, "It has been difficult to have enough physicians to serve all the patients."

Nevertheless, the clinic does provide another

medical specialty that is in high demand: dental care. Since the state of California stopped paying for adult dental care, the need for low-income dental care in Marin has soared, Tavaszi said. Marin Community Clinics operates three dental clinics, one of which is open seven days a week.

"We have been amazed and shocked at the amount of unmet dental needs," Tavaszi said. The cost of operating the dental clinics has largely

been covered by grants from Sutter Health, she said.

The new optometry clinic is at the county of Marin's Health & Wellness Campus at 3260 Kerner Blvd. in San Rafael. The county is providing the space for the clinic — two examination rooms and another room for administrative purposes — free of charge.

Larry Meredith, director of the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services, said that for Marin residents who are aging and uninsured in particular, "it's a major issue to have corrected vision."

Even though Marin Community Clinics opened a 13,000-square-foot health center at 3110 Kerner Blvd. in 2008, it has leased additional space at the

Health & Wellness Campus to accommodate recent expansion. Since opening the Health & Wellness Campus, the county has closed its clinics providing obstetric and gynecological care and transferred those patients to Marin Community Clinics. Because Marin Community Clinics is a "federally qualified health center" it receives larger federal reimbursements for the services it provides to Medicaid patients.

Meredith said, "We're very pleased with the results of this migration."

For information regarding optometry services at Marin Community Clinics, call 448-1500.

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