

GUERNEVILLE » Russian River Health Center offers comprehensive health services for people living in far-flung corners of Sonoma County

Providing crucial care



BETH SCHLANKER / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Mayra Barragan, 6, has her teeth cleaned Wednesday by dental hygienist Jaime Dahl at the new Russian River Health and Wellness Center in Guerneville. The new clinic houses primary medical, dental, psychiatric, acupuncture, wellness, addiction, HIV and "gender expansion" services.

By **MARTIN ESPINOZA**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Mayra Barragan, 6, sat in a dental chair last week at the new Russian River Health Center, just five blocks from her Guerneville home.

All smiles and no complaints, Mayra and dental hygienist Jaime Dahl discussed proper flossing and the need to keep one's mouth clear of both visible food and invisible germs.

"They're actually not invisible," says Mayra, clearly acknowledging the dangers microscopic organisms pose to oral health.

A year ago, the general cleaning Mayra and two of her siblings received the day before Thanksgiving would have taken place at the West County Health Centers' dental clinic in Sebastopol, requiring a 40-minute bus ride on Sonoma County Transit.

An arson fire in 2015 destroyed the original Russian River Health Center just a few blocks away from the newly constructed, state-of-the-art community clinic at 16387 First Street. After the blaze, dental offices were eventually moved to the Sebastopol clinic site.

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Boxes of vaccinations sit in a refrigerator Wednesday at the new Russian River Health and Wellness Center in Guerneville.

The convenience of now having a brand new, full-service medical facility in Guerneville is not lost on Mayra's mother, Maria Isabel Ruiz.

"Having the clinic here is magical," Ruiz said. "It was like a dream come true. I've been watching the construction here since the first brick was laid."

The new Russian River Health Center, which officially opened its doors in late summer, is a far cry from the old health center, a converted residence that was repurposed as a community clinic in 1974.

The new clinic houses primary medical, dental, psychiatric, acupuncture, wellness, addiction, HIV and "gender expansion" services. The second and third floors, which house most of the health care offices, are supported by thick concrete pilings, pounded 60 feet into the ground, to avoid damage from Russian River flooding.

Underneath the second floor is a cavernous parking lot that exposes the facility's dramatic structural properties, leaving no doubt that the clinic was built to the latest seismic and storm standards.

"The engineering requirements were gnarly," said Ellen Bauer, chief administrative officer for West County Health Centers. "This is the place you want to be during the zombie apocalypse or whatever comes, whether it's flood or fire."

For Bauer, and other staff at the new health center, the excitement of having the county's newest community clinic is palpable. Over the past two decades, community health centers across the county have seen major expansions, with new state-of-the-art facilities



PHOTOS BY BETH SCHLANKER / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Medical assistant Cindy Lewis, left, and medical assistant supervisor Sean Lyons work in the lab Wednesday at the new Russian River Health and Wellness Center in Guerneville. Below, chairs line the waiting room. The center officially opened its doors in the late summer.

being added at an almost dizzying speed.

With construction fueled by hundreds of millions in federal dollars and local donations, cities including Petaluma, Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park and the Sonoma Valley area, have advanced new projects that have made so-called federally qualified health centers the second largest primary care providers in the county.

West County Health Centers has seen significant facilities growth as well, though nothing to the degree of towns and cities along the Highway 101 corridor.

West county's turn

Still the need has never been greater along the lower Russian River and in other tucked-away corners

of the west county.

In 2021, the West County Health Centers served about 10,000 patients for a total of 76,484 visits across all its services sites. Of these visits, 66% were medical, 30% were for mental health and substance use and 3.4% were for dental issues.

Bauer said she expects to see an increase in patients and visits with the opening of the new Russian River health and wellness facility. She said dental visits alone expected to grow by an additional 1,500.

Dr. Marshall Kubota was a young doctor when he worked briefly at the old Russian River clinic in 1982. Kubota recalls the difficulty of converting the home into a primary medical clinic, including



dealing with crowded spaces, lifting the building 10 feet off ground and installing an elevator.

Kubota, now regional medical director for Partnership HealthPlan of California, which administers Medi-Cal insurance in 14 counties across the state, said the new facility is key to delivering much needed health care to residents in the west county.

Distance, geography and weather often play a crucial role in a person's decision whether to seek health care.

"The distances that people have to travel to get to a clinician are much, much greater and more difficult if you live out in the in the back hills or out toward the coast," Kubota said. "It's a long drive to get to your doctor's office."

A community gem

The new First Street structure sits next to the Guerneville Safeway and appears more like a Russian River lodge than a community clinic. The design offers views from outdoor patios, conference rooms and even patient exam rooms.

One of the key components of the clinic is a separate building called the Resiliency Center, a sort of community gathering place that was built on the same footprint as the former natural foods and

organic produce market in the same location.

The building has two large spaces where local groups and residents can have community and in-house meetings.

The Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods held a staff meeting there on Nov. 19, a gathering that would have otherwise taken place in the local library or Guerneville School on Armstrong Woods Road.

Justin Lindenberg, executive director of Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, said the local chamber of commerce notified his organization that the space was going to be open to local groups. Lindenberg said he was struck by the beauty of the new health center.

"It was intentionally designed around community," Lindenberg said.

"And the staff really live the mission ... they think about health holistically, not just the health center, but the Resiliency Center was designed with that in mind, that they could connect and create community on-site, right next to where community members and patients are getting treatment."

Jason Cunningham, CEO of West County Health Centers, agrees that the new clinic is more than just a health services hub. Getting it built wasn't

easy, he said.

After the old health center burned down in late 2015, the initial cost of rebuilding was projected at \$10 million, Cunningham said.

But those projections quickly ballooned due to the cost of structural requirements for natural disasters.

After the 2017 North Bay wildfires, construction prices skyrocketed, even as most charitable giving was funneled into the county's historic rebuild efforts. The final cost of the clinic project came to \$15 million, Cunningham said.

Significant donations have been received, but Bauer said the organization is trying to raise \$9 million to pay off the remainder of the cost.

Cunningham and Bauer said the west county residents, many of them among the most vulnerable in the county, have long deserved such a facility.

"My hope is that the community feels like this isn't just a building, that this is something that they can feel proud of and feel like they're using," Cunningham said.

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