

# La Clinica

## *A community health landmark*

In 1969 a group of activists on St. Paul's West Side opened a free medical clinic to serve the neighborhood's poor and immigrant residents. The People's Health Center operated in a local church, used volunteer help and treated six or seven patients a day. Thirty-five years later, in a parable of tenacity and idealism, that little clinic has not only survived but thrived, evolving into West Side Community Health Services, Minnesota's biggest network of nonprofit neighborhood health centers, with 19 branches and some \$8 million in revenue.

Next month its Concord Street flagship, La Clinica, will move into a handsome new building that completes a four-year expansion and symbolizes its remarkable growth. West Side Community Health Services is also raising the final sums of an \$8.4 million capital fund drive, and it deserves the support of every Minnesotan who believes in social justice, a healthy community and efficient, high-quality medical care.

Neighborhood health centers such as La Clinica are mostly invisible, but they serve an invaluable role in America's patchwork health care system. Operating in poor and immigrant neighborhoods, they serve patients who would otherwise have to drive miles to find a doctor. Although most of their patients have insurance — private or Medicaid — they are major providers for uninsured families, offering prenatal checkups, dental services, child immunizations and other vital care for as little as \$10 per visit — though they turn away no one for lack of money. They also reach a growing immigrant community whose members otherwise feel intimidated by American medicine. At La Clinica, for example, 60 percent of the staff is bilingual, and on one recent morning the lobby buzzed with conversations in English, Spanish, Hmong and Spanglish.

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"Their willingness to see people who don't have coverage, their emphasis on educating patients, their ability to overcome cultural barriers — they're just essential providers," says Julie Brunner, executive director of the Minnesota Council of Health Plans, which represents big players such as Medica and HealthPartners.

Across Minnesota, neighborhood health centers serve more than 100,000 patients a year, and they fill an appalling gap in the American medical system. Research shows that poor, minority and immigrant Americans are less likely than others to see doctors regularly, to get preventive care for chronic ailments such as diabetes and high blood pressure, and to receive appropriate hospital care for acute conditions such as coronary and renal failure. Together, these patterns are called "health disparities," and a recent study by George Washington University found that neighborhood health centers such as La Clinica are highly effective — and highly cost-efficient — at narrowing the gaps.

With its busy lobby, cramped exam rooms and careworn facilities, La Clinica has during 35 years become a triumphant victim of its own success. Next month's grand opening will celebrate that success, and Minnesotans should ensure that it continues.