

St. Paul's West Side Community Health Service serves many immigrant communities



BY NEKESSA OPOTI, TC DAILY PLANET
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Some advocates of a public healthcare option have argued for a national system of community health clinics because in this they see a wholesome and affordable approach in providing quality healthcare. The [West Side Community Health Services \(WSCHS\)](#), the largest community clinic organization in Minnesota, clearly demonstrates the value of community clinics. When it began as the People's Health Center, forty years ago in a church basement, and then expanded to La Clinica, it served mostly Spanish-speaking residents. Today, WSCHS has expanded to serve Hmong and East African refugees and immigrants as well.

Like most community clinics, WSCHS has community programs on preventative healthcare and providing healthcare services to patients who would not afford a doctor's visit. WSCHS runs several healthcare services in 18 different areas within the Twin Cities. Patients come in for any variety of ailments: diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, immunizations, teen pregnancy, prenatal care, dental care, HIV/Sexually Transmitted Infections, infectious diseases, and mental health. La Clinica on the West Side of St. Paul is perhaps on the most recognized ones. According to the WSCHS Web site, La Clinica provides acute, preventive and chronic care, prenatal care, laboratory, pharmacy, mental health, outreach, and family support services. WSCHS also has several dental clinics that serve St. Paul.

A couple of anecdotes from WSCHS' annual report demonstrate that community clinics continue to serve as resources to people in their communities.

A young man sought care at the local emergency room for a bullet wound he received in a drive-by shooting. He had no health insurance and declined to have the bullet removed because he could not afford it, resigning to instead return to the emergency room periodically to have the wound cleaned. Eventually, a friend suggested going to a WSCHS clinic for help. With assistance from a WSCHS physician, a letter was sent to the State of Minnesota requesting emergency Medical Assistance, and the request was approved. The young man was able to have the bullet surgically removed and also received follow-up care.

[West Side Community Health Services](#)
 Here's a list of WSCHS clinics:

Healthcare for the Homeless, which offers acute, preventive, chemical dependency, and mental health services at ten shelters and drop-in sites in St. Paul, is another of WSCHS program.

[La Clinica](#)
 153 Cesar Chavez Street, St. Paul, MN 55107 / Phone: (651) 222.1816

A seven year old boy was seen at a WSCHS' Health Care for the Homeless clinic for an asthma condition. He and his mom were in a temporary shelter after fleeing an abusive situation. During that hectic process, his medication was left at home. And although the family had health insurance to replace the medication, using it would have brought risk to them if information regarding their whereabouts was revealed. Health Care for the Homeless staff quickly acquired a new nebulizer to treat the boy's asthma, and he and his mother remained safe and healthy.

[East Side Family Clinic](#)
 860 Arcade Street, Saint Paul, MN 55106 / Phone: (651) 772.9757

"The unique needs of the target populations are most often not being met within the existing mainstream health care system, which targets the dominant insured Caucasian population," said Valerie Aas, the Communications Director of WSCHS. "Consistently, many recent immigrants and refugees have limited income and experience cultural and language barriers. Transportation and lack of knowledge about how to navigate the system are also common barriers to accessing appropriate health care."

[Health Care for the Homeless / Cuidados de Salud para Personas sin Hogar](#)
 438 Main Street, Saint Paul, MN 55102 / Phone: (651) 290.6815

While offering bilingual and multicultural services has been its strongest attribute, WSCHS is struggling to keep up with a growing immigrant population that is in dire need of affordable healthcare. With more than 70% of their patients living below the poverty line, WSCHS relies on private and public donations and grants to run their programs. Patients pay fees on a sliding scale based on their income and family size.

"WSCHS continues to experience an increase in the numbers of East African, Hmong and Latino immigrant and refugee patients served," said Aas. "One ongoing challenge has been to address staffing to meet the needs of our changing patient population - both in the recruitment and retention of culturally competent staff." 53% of their patients in 2008 were best served in a language other than English.

[Health Start School-Based Clinics / Cuidados de Salud Situados en Escuelas](#)
 860 Arcade Street, Saint Paul, MN 55106 / Phone: (651) 772-9757

To meet the needs of its growing clientele, WSCHS plans to construct a new East Side Family Clinic to be located at the northeast intersection of Arcade and Minnehaha in East St. Paul. A goal of the WSCHS is to not only serve under-served populations, but to bridge the healthcare disparities a growing concern within healthcare.

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