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Community rallying around massive two-day free medical clinic

Donations

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Community support is growing for the massive two-day free medical clinic, scheduled for Nov. 14-15 at the Grass Valley Veterans Memorial Building.

Organized by the Roseville-based nonprofit California CareForce, medical, dental and vision services will be available to anyone in need of care, thanks to roughly 350 volunteers and 50 to 60 medical practitioners.

As many as 1,200 local residents who are struggling with health-care costs are expected to show up for the first-come, first-served event.

Grass Valley organizer Mindy Oberne says as much as \$400,000 in healthcare services will be donated by medical staff. Would-be patients are expected to travel from as far as Yuba City and Sacramento to receive care.

In addition to individuals signing up to volunteer, a growing number of organizations have joined the ambitious effort in various capacities, including Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital, Sierra Family Medical Clinic, Western Sierra Medical Clinic and the Chapa-De Indian Health Program.

An estimated \$15,000 to \$25,000 is needed for equipment and to house, feed and provide for the visiting professional volunteers, including physicians, registered nurses, EMTs, licensed vocational nurses/licensed practical nurses, oral surgeons, dentists, hygienists, dental assistants, dental X-ray technicians, ophthalmologists, optometrists, opticians, ophthalmic technicians, acupuncturists, chiropractors and more. Dental care will include restorative work and complex extractions.

California CareForce provides everything the volunteer medical professionals need to perform their jobs, including vision exam equipment, dental equipment, tools, medicines, exam tables, dental chairs and even meals. Free eyeglasses are made on site.

The Nevada County Democratic Women's Club has committed to prepare and serve 250 breakfasts for one of the clinic days.

A women's group at the Emmanuel Episcopal Church will be providing 50 breakfasts.

In addition, Unity in the Gold Country, the Sierra Center for Spiritual Living and the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains have pledged donations.

Thus far the biggest donations have come from churches, said Oberne, who has been giving PowerPoint presentations at local houses of worship and service organizations. In the coming months, Oberne will be giving CareForce presentations to the Nevada City Lions Club, the Nevada City Rotary Club, Gold Country Kiwanis and others.

Oberne, who is chairing the local host effort, volunteered with three others at a similar CareForce clinic in March in Coachella Valley in order to witness coordination efforts and the delivery of care.

"Wow — it really instilled my confidence in California CareForce," she said. "We now know we're working with the right people. It was well-organized, clean and computerized. We want to show CareForce what a great community Grass Valley is so they will come back and do it again."

California CareForce and The California Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons began a partnership in 2011 to hold clinics throughout the state, and they've been building a growing group of volunteers ever since, said Pamela Congdon, California CareForce's president and volunteer. All professionals are thoroughly vetted, and in the past, clinics have helped connect patients with local services. CareForce is a non-political, non-denominational organization whose mission is simply to provide free health, dental, and vision care services to Californians who need it.

Since 2011, five clinics have been conducted in California. A total of 5,746 volunteers have provided approximately 46,272 services worth over \$6 million to more than 15,000 patients in need. The organization is able to deploy clinics with as many as 70 dental stations, 20 medical stations and 10 vision "exam lanes."

While many who come to these clinics are uninsured, a large number are "under-insured," said Congdon, meaning they can't afford to meet the large insurance deductibles that would lead them to the costly care they need. Patients are not asked to provide any paperwork, just an emergency contact number.

"We applaud this far-reaching community effort to address health care issues for people in great need," said Western Sierra Medical Clinic CEO Scott McFarland. "Our medical providers will

accept referrals to help those who need more care than what they can receive at the event, and we will be on site to answer questions and help enroll people in insurance. We're enthusiastic about participating and playing a role of improving health care in our community."

California CareForce is funded entirely by corporate and individual donations, all of which goes toward patient care. Some donations are as small as \$5, \$10 or \$100, said Congdon. The nonprofit is entirely volunteer-driven with the exception of one part-time staff person.

Nonetheless, each clinic around the state faces two critical challenges: lining up the medical professionals willing to donate time and locating sponsors who will help pay for the clinic. Grass Valley is no exception.

"We have expenses for the cost of the venue, food (we feed the volunteers and patients when possible), supplies, equipment rental, security and maintenance," said Congdon. "The sheer numbers of people who show up is proof there is a real need out there. There are people just like you and me out there who never thought they'd find themselves in this position. As far as I'm concerned, there is no better job out there than mine and no better feeling than helping people who have been suffering for a long time."

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