

EDITORIALS

Saving the safety net

Stimulus money flows to area health centers

Two of the region's larger community health centers, San Ysidro Health and Vista Community Clinic, will receive \$21 million in federal stimulus money to build major additions.

That's great news because it will further their mission, providing basic care to those with little or no access. It's great news as well because it is a sign that stimulus funds – a program this page has been highly skeptical of – are reaching the community and the intended purposes of pumping up the economy and creating jobs.

San Diego has no countywide public hospital. Two dozen community health centers have evolved instead as our safety net. These clinics provide primary medical, dental, prenatal, nutrition and mental care to patients who typically have low incomes and/or no insurance.

This phase of stimulus grants was competitive. There were 700 applicants nationally, but just 85 awards. Remarkably, San Diego County came away with two, an endorsement of the quality of care.

Money will flow almost immediately into construction jobs – the buildings must be open in 24 months. With additional space, Vista plans to hire seven full-time doctors and San Ysidro probably five. That's encouraging because for every physician added, four or five support staffers are hired.

San Ysidro, a 14-outlet organization, also serves south San Diego, an area at times seemingly forgotten by city government. Some 40,000 people there, estimates Chief Executive Ed Martinez,

lack medical insurance. Sites in the district suitable for care facilities are almost nonexistent. His clinic will tear down a building on South Euclid Avenue, a former McDonald's, and erect a 14,000-square-foot center. Annual rental expense will drop \$140,000 as San Ysidro consolidates tiny medical and dental outlets nearby into a one-stop location. All who visit for medical care, Martinez says, will have the opportunity to see a dentist as well, preferably on the same visit.

This will make a difference, said a pleased Martinez, "South San Diego has not had any new programs in years."

Vista, meantime, will demolish offices on a lot it owns next to a primary care facility on Vale Terrace. It will build 30,000 square feet of new space for primary care, add a connecting bridge and a parking garage. There will be more exam rooms, more doctors and nurse practitioners, and expanded

pediatrics and family practice programs. Thanks to the flow of stimulus money, medical records will be completely automated by August.

"We are elated to have the federal stimulus dollars," said Chief Executive Barbara Mannino. She projects the five-location Vista organization will need to double its space by 2016 just to cope with demand.

Community health centers, President Barack Obama said in a speech last week, are the safety net in America's medical care delivery system. The influx of federal grant money, as we see it, means San Diego's safety net will be less frayed in the years ahead.

