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HEALTH LIFELINE

The clinics of the Redwood Community Health Coalition are the medical safety net for many under- and uninsured

By [Katy Hillenmeyer](#)
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Barbara and Greg Finley are in a bind. Her nerve impairment and his asthma require frequent medical care. Those pre-existing ailments make private health insurance unaffordable, but the Guerneville couple earn too much to qualify for low-income, government insurance.

"We're at a real vulnerable time," said Barbara Finley, 59, waiting to see her family doctor at Russian River Health Center. "Insurance at \$2,000 a month doesn't even include prescriptions." The Finleys are among 8,150 patients treated annually by West County Health Centers, whose services in Guerneville, Occidental, Forestville and Graton are part of the Redwood Community Health Coalition's primary care network.

Eighteen community health centers, mainly in Sonoma County, make up the coalition, which also reaches Napa, Marin and Yolo counties. More than 157,000 people depend on these clinics for primary and preventive care, including 63,324 in Sonoma County -- mostly uninsured or underinsured.

"I see them as a critical part of our local health-care delivery system," Sonoma County Public Health Officer Dr. Mary Maddux-Gonzalez said. "They are really the critical, primary-care safety net organizations ... for outpatient care."

Staffed by well-trained doctors, many of whom graduated from Sutter Medical Center of Santa Rosa's family practice residency program, the community clinics treat those with private insurance, too. Privately insured residents like Guerneville real estate agent Debra Johnson make up one-fifth of West County Health Centers' patients.

"I look at the health center as the hub of our community," said Johnson, 51, who first came to the Russian River clinic with an injured finger

"They have opened up a door for me to get help," said Njuki, who has enrolled in Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program. Since several federally designated clinics within the coalition receive higher Medi-Cal reimbursements than private practices do, patients can access primary and specialty care not readily available to them elsewhere.

During his 20 years at Hewlett-Packard (now Agilent Technologies), Craig Stone enjoyed the benefits of health insurance. But a neck injury caused him bad headaches, numbness in his right arm and -- after he was laid off -- made finding work difficult.

Family nurse practitioner Annie Nicol, a Petaluma Health Center veteran, provides care at the Petaluma homeless shelter where Stone lives and is employed. She steered him to the clinic, where an EKG showed Stone had suffered a heart attack, masked by his frequent pain and numbness. Stone underwent quadruple bypass surgery at Sutter in September. "I really owe Annie and (my) doctor ... and this place my life," Stone said.

Though the clinics stretch from Cloverdale to Stinson Beach and many exceed their capacity, few North Coast residents outside the health-care arena may be aware of them.

"We're not more visible because the population we serve is not more visible," coalition Executive Director Nancy Oswald said. "In Sonoma County, as being uninsured becomes more and more mainstream, there is an increasing visibility."

The number of uninsured patients whom Sonoma County community health centers serve continues to creep up, Oswald said: from 19,101 in 2003 to 28,677 in 2005 and rising.

Sixty-one percent of people the clinics treat live below federal poverty guidelines -- for a family of four, an income of \$20,650 per year. Nearly a third are uninsured, and more than half are Latino.

For the 47,000 Sonoma County residents with Medi-Cal, the clinics deliver up to 85 percent of their primary care, Maddux-Gonzalez said. Many clinics also provide dental and mental health services, increasingly with bilingual professionals. Patients come from Spanish-speaking families. At the county's only clinic on an elementary school campus, the Santa Rosa site's staff care for 3,000 children each year.

Their focus includes battling anemia, asthma, obesity, dental decay -- anything interfering with school readiness and attendance.

"We're really making that connection between health and learning," said clinic director Elisabeth Chicoine, a pediatric nurse practitioner. For parents confronting barriers to care based on culture, economics, transportation or immigration status, "it's a neutral place for families," she added. "It's where they have a lot of trust already, on a school campus, and it's where families can get to easily."

- years ago to the Russian River clinic from San Francisco General Hospital, aiming to devote a portion of his practice to HIV care. The Guerneville practice includes 224 patients with HIV -- one example of the way each clinic has adapted to its community's health needs.

The 660-square-mile region the West County centers cover is home to 60,000 people, and was deemed a Health Professional Shortage Area in 1987, the first in the United States to be designated based on its high incidence of AIDS, homelessness and poverty, said Mary Szecsey, the West County centers' executive director.

Beyond free-standing Guerneville and Occidental clinics, the centers also reach out to teens through peer education, birth control counseling and STD prevention in Forestville, and by providing health education to day laborers in Graton. A Sebastopol satellite clinic is set to open later this year.

"It's one of our strengths, that we have these differences," Bromer said. "We provide state-of-the-art health care. The fact that we serve underinsured patients doesn't mean we provide a lesser standard of care."

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Clinics from Cloverdale to Sacramento

The Redwood Community Health Coalition traces its origins to the early 1990s, when community health center directors in Sonoma, Napa and Marin counties and Sonoma County's health department started collaborating on programs and securing funding.

In 1994, with state grant funding, the coalition was formally established as a nonprofit.

Most sites are open weekdays 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., but hours vary by location. At many clinics, health professionals provide 24-hour, seven-day-a-week, on-call coverage to areas they serve. For more information, log on to www.rchc.net

Members include:

Alexander Valley Regional Medical Center, 6 Tarman Drive, Cloverdale. 894-4229.

Alliance Medical Center, 1381 University St., Healdsburg. 433-5494.

Coastal Health Alliance, offering primary care in Bolinas, Point Reyes Station and Stinson Beach. (415) 663-8666.

CommuniCare Health Centers, serving Davis, Esparto, Knights Landing, Woodland, West Sacramento. (530) 758-2060.

Roseland Children's Health Center, part of Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County, 962 Sebastopol Road, Santa Rosa. 578-2005.

Community Health Clinic Olé, with sites in Calistoga, Spanish Flat, Napa and St. Helena. 254-1770.

Marin Community Clinics, with sites in Greenbrae and Novato. (415) 448-1500.

Petaluma Health Center, 1301 Southpoint Blvd., No. A, Petaluma. 559-7500.

Planned Parenthood Golden Gate, with clinics in Rohnert Park and San Rafael. (800) 967-7526.

Sonoma County Public Health clinical services, 3420 Chanate Road, Santa Rosa. 565-4820.

Sonoma Valley Community Health Center, 430 W. Napa St., Suite F, Sonoma. 939-6070.

Southwest Community Health Center, 751 Lombardi Court, Santa Rosa. Also supports the high school-based Elsie Allen Health Center. 547-2222.

St. Joseph Medical Access clinics, 751 Lombardi Court, Suite A, Santa Rosa. 546-5899.

Sutter Family Practice Center, 3320 Chanate Road, Santa Rosa. 576-4100.

West County Health Centers, Inc., with sites in Occidental and Guerneville. 874-2444.

Winters Healthcare Foundation, 7 Main St., Winters. (530) 795-5200.

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