

\$2.1 million upgrade of community asset celebrated at ceremony



Barbara Fink (right) of Family Health Centers of San Diego snapped a picture of some of those at the grand-opening ceremony of its new \$2.1 million North Park Pediatric Clinic and Development Center. John R. McCutchen / U-T photos

NORTH PARK

Pediatric care pushed to higher level at clinic

By Jennifer Vigil
STAFF WRITER

Dominique Reynoso sat waiting in Room 2, watching over Dyana, her listless daughter, and Isabella, her bouncy one.

Dyana, 8, had good reason to be sitting quietly on the exam table while her 3-year-old sister zipped about the room smiling and engaging visitors. Her ear hurt.

Reynoso, a homemaker, regularly takes her children to the North Park Pediatric Clinic and Development Center to tend to their ailments. Sometimes she receives surprises, as when a doctor noticed Dyana squinting. It turns out the third-grader needed glasses.

"I feel a lot safer here," Reynoso said. "They get attention here, more than anywhere else they've been."

The clinic still diagnoses earaches and colds, but it is increasingly focusing on other problems, such as Dyana's eyesight, that could impede a child's ability to develop and learn normally.

That's part of the mission of Family Health Centers of San Diego's new \$2.1 million North Park clinic, built next door to the one that's been on 30th Street for more than a decade. It includes a room devoted to the evaluation of developmental delays, from poor speech skills to hearing loss.

Doctors began seeing patients at the clinic, dedicated to pediatric care, last year, but officials hosted a grand opening this week. The low-key ribbon-cut-



The clinic's Dr. Khawla Suleiman (left) and Dr. Mario Eyzaguirre were shown at the pediatric-care facility, which now includes a room dedicated to the evaluation of delays in child development, from poor speech skills to hearing loss.

ting drew high-profile guests, including Rep. Susan Davis, D-San Diego, county Supervisor Ron Roberts and San Diego Councilman Todd Gloria.

The Family Health Centers' Chula Vista clinic, though open since December, also held an opening ceremony this week. It is seeking funding to build a similar exam room for developmental challenges. There also are plans to include one in the expanded City Heights clinic, which should be completed in 2011.

Physicians and therapists at the centers have devoted time to diagnoses of speech, motor and hearing impediments for years, but Fran Butler-Cohen, the centers' top executive, said she has been convinced of the importance of integrating the assessments into regular care.

Butler-Cohen pointed to examples such as Dyana's, where doctors spotted other issues while seeing patients.

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Assessing child development is focus of funding

In two notable cases, therapists determined a 5-year-old boy needed a hearing aid and prescribed 10 weeks of speech therapy for a 3-year-old girl.

"That's the payoff for investing in early-childhood assessment," said Butler-Cohen, who will mark her 23rd year with Family Health Centers this month.

The centers are one of four health-care providers in the county that have received funding for developmental testing from First 5 California, a state agency supported by a tobacco tax voters approved in 1998.

The proceeds fund early childhood education and health initiatives, and are administered by 58 county commissions, including one in San Diego.

This year, the county's First 5 Commission set aside \$15 million for the developmental assessment program, called Healthy Development Services. That's more than 25 percent of the agency's \$57 million budget, and a \$4 million boost from 2008.

Dr. Gene Nathan, a former president of the American Academy of Pediatrics' local chapter, advises the commission. He said the county's pro-

gram has reached 66,000 children.

"The earlier we pick up children who need a little bit of help or even a lot of help, the earlier we can do something about it," Nathan said. "It makes a huge difference later on in life."

Yet the funding, along with money for other initiatives, is threatened by the state budget crisis. Butler-Cohen said her clinics have seen public funding slashed in other areas, including youth mentoring and pregnancy prevention programs.

The hits to the centers' budget may keep coming, but so will the patients, especially as the economic downturn continues and residents lose jobs and health-care coverage.

About 5,000 children are expected to visit the North Park pediatric clinic this year. Two-thirds of the patients at the adjacent clinic hail from families who make less than the federal poverty level, which was \$21,200 for a family of four last year.

Butler-Cohen said the clinics will meet the community's needs, regardless of the budget challenges or potential increase in demand.

"We've been here many years, seen many cycles, and we know that our programs will survive," she said. "We just need to be a lot smarter about how to run them."

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