

## **Clinic Offers Homeless Dose of Good Health, Kindness**

Project Healthy Neighbors sets up shop at Casa Esperanza to provide basic care and immunizations



Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital nurse Paul Liepfert gives an H1N1 flu shot to an attendee of Monday's Project Healthy Neighbors clinic at the Casa Esperanza Homeless Shelter. The three-day event will continue Tuesday and Wednesday. (Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)

By [Lara Cooper](#), [Noozhawk Staff Writer](#) | Published on 11.16.2009

A line of people sprawled down Cacique Street in front of the [Casa Esperanza Homeless Shelter](#) early Monday morning as they waited to get into four makeshift tents that had been placed in the shelter's parking lot.

The tents were soon bustling with activity as people in line shuffled in for free health-care services as a part of Project Healthy Neighbors, which started its fifth year of offering basic services and immunizations to Santa Barbara's homeless.

Volunteers gathered to administer immunizations, give counseling, direct people to a physician and give dental hygiene care. Free haircuts and nearly 400 pairs of shoes donated by [Soles4Souls](#) also were part of the giveaways in the three-day event, which will continue from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. Tuesday and Wednesday.

Among those working to serve the homeless Monday was Ken Williams, a social worker who spearheaded the event. He was busily checking in with volunteers and the homeless he works with every day.

The event has taken on a new imperative this year. Twenty-six homeless people have died this year alone in Santa Barbara, and a sculpture by Morris Bear stood near the activity, displaying the names of the deceased. Nine new names have been added to the sculpture since it was auctioned off this summer at a Casa Esperanza fundraiser.

As an incentive to get the homeless to partake in the screenings and immunizations, those who go through all of the tents can pick up a free backpack with essentials such as a sweatshirt, socks, a poncho, hygiene products and a first aid kit.

When a young man asked Williams if he could have a backpack without going through all of the medical checkpoints, Williams gently told him he would have to go through. “We don’t want you to end up as a name on that sculpture,” he said.

Keeping the homeless healthy as the community advances into winter is especially important with sicknesses such as the [H1N1 flu](#) and seasonal influenza looming.

The clinic is a collaboration of 20 local organizations and dozens of volunteers. Backers of the event said it’s the largest mobile medical clinic of its kind in Southern California.

Merryl Brown, who helped Williams coordinate the event, said supplying the backpacks has really helped serve as an incentive. Brown, who was watching the 2-year-old son of a homeless single dad as he made his way through the line, said people had expressed gratitude to have the services available to them.

“The word is out in the homeless community,” she said. “People are very gracious, and they’re really happy to be welcomed.”



Public health workers provide information to clinic attendees Monday. (Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)

Nearly everyone involved with the event said the turnout on the first day had exceeded that of the first day last year.

A 62-year-old woman, who asked that she be identified only as Marie, carried out a backpack and a pair of shoes after emerging from clinic.

Marie said she lives in the Faulding Hotel, a low-income apartment building on Haley Street, but qualified as “near homeless” and was able to take advantage of the clinic. She came specifically to get her blood pressure checked, which she said she’s trying to keep down by watching her diet and her weight.

Many of her neighbors have had their [SSI](#) payments cut drastically, she said, “so all of this little stuff helps.”

Richard, who is homeless, stopped at the clinic to get an H1N1 immunization. He said it was the first time he had made it to the clinic and that he appreciated its presence.

Outside of the [Santa Barbara County Public Health Department](#), the homeless have few places to go for basic health care such as immunizations, according to Jan Fadden, who works as the medical coordinator at the shelter.

H1N1, pneumonia and influenza immunizations as well as tuberculosis and HIV testing were all a part of the services offered.

“That’s why we have this,” she said, gesturing to the packed tents. Giving the homeless a supportive environment to seek those services encourages turnout, too, making it less intimidating.

More than 250 people came to Monday’s event, according to Casa Esperanza Executive Director Mike Foley.

Foley lauded the efforts of Williams and Ralph Barbosa with Public Health, and called the effort “one of the most amazing collaborative efforts in the history of Santa Barbara.”

“All of Santa Barbara will be healthier this winter as a result of this work,” he said.

Williams agreed. “The number of people served beat our expectations,” he said at the end of Monday’s event, and that all of the efforts, supplies and volunteers were impressive.

“But the truly moving part was to be found in the eyes of the homeless with the recognition that others cared about them and wanted to reach out a helping hand,” he said. “This day belonged to them.”

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