

BREAKING NEWS

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Free East Bay RotaCare medical clinic reopening soon, needs volunteers

Pittsburg site looking for a few doctors, nurses and others to volunteer



Nurse volunteer Shawwna Costanzo, left, talks with a patient at the Rotacare Free Medical Clinic at St. Vincent de Paul in Pittsburg on Jan. 29, 2020.



After nearly four months of offering only limited telephone help, the Pittsburg RotaCare Free Medical Clinic at St. Vincent de Paul is gearing up to reopen. But, just as some patients have been reluctant to seek treatment because of the COVID-19 crisis, some volunteers will not be returning, so new ones will be needed to get it back on track.

The clinic, which is all volunteer-run, since 2011 has served the underprivileged and uninsured of Contra Costa County who otherwise would have no access to health care. In March, like many places, it was forced to shutter its doors because of the COVID-19 crisis and shelter-in-place orders.

But, recognizing that the need for health care does not stop even during a pandemic, RotaCare is planning to restart in-person services beginning Aug. 5. To do so, it will need new volunteer medical professionals, especially doctors, physician assistants and nurses, its managers say.

“People need to be seen,” said Barbara Hunt, development director for St. Vincent de Paul, RotaCare’s clinic partner. “You can’t diagnose some things over the phone. We need to be able to provide face-to-face medical care.”

The clinic specializes in providing short-term urgent care, which includes medical exams, diagnostic and lab testing, and medications for patients over 18 years old. If necessary, patients are referred for surgical procedures to Operation Access, a partnering organization, while COVID-19 patients are referred to county services, Hunt said.

Before the pandemic, the clinic’s two volunteer physicians saw 15 to 20 patients on a given four-hour shift. But, with more people having lost their jobs — and health insurance — as a result of COVID-19’s impact, Hunt said she expects patients’ needs to increase when the clinic reopens its doors.

One telltale sign is St. Vincent de Paul’s food giveaways. Before COVID-19, the nonprofit’s pantries served 6,300 county residents a week, but now that number has surged to 10,500. An additional 24 large food distributions have also been held, she said.



“We’re starting to see it now — they are starting to reach out to us for help,” said Hunt, whose nonprofit also provides also other means of support for those in need. “It’s what happens when you are in crisis. You turn and pivot to what is in front of you to solve the problems of that day.”

Though many of those will be able to eventually qualify for insurance through MediCal, some whose hours were cut may not, nor will those who are undocumented, she said.

“If you are that working poor or if you are undocumented, it’s very hard to get care,” Hunt said. “Restaurant and health care workers — they are being really squeezed.”

“We know that there is a population out there that needs to see a doctor and we need to be able to help them,” she added.

Dr. Hamid Khonsari, who has a private practice in Antioch, is the center’s medical director, and is one of those who has regularly volunteered. He plans to return, but most of the other volunteer doctors cannot because of the virus, Hunt said.

“We need physicians that will do face-to-face (consultations),” she said. “Most of our volunteer physicians are retired but they are in the vulnerable category (for contracting COVID-19.”



Dr. Jane Hewitt, a retired Kaiser Permanente internal medicine physician, has been volunteering for several years for the RotaCare Free Medical Clinic at St. Vincent de Paul in Pittsburg. (photo by Brit Hotaling)

Dr. Jane Hewitt, a volunteer since 2012, has been helping with telemedicine calls since the coronavirus crisis began, but at 69 years old, she won’t be able to provide face-to-face calls during the pandemic.



“I have a personal desire to help other people,” the retired Walnut Creek doctor said. “It’s delightful to volunteer part time, to be able to use the medical knowledge that I have. There’s a huge need out there.”

Hewitt said her patients have been “very appreciative” in the clinic, which is the busiest of all the Bay Area’s 11 RotaCare clinics.

“I have met some wonderful people with wonderful stories and have been able to make a difference in their lives,” she said. “It’s been a great experience. I appreciate it.”

Hewitt said she hopes to continue volunteering in telemedicine, which the clinic is continuing to develop. An electronic health record system is slated to be installed in the coming months.

But for the time being, both Hunt and Hewitt are hoping a few good medical professionals step up to the plate to help, so they can serve as many residents as possible during the weekly Wednesday and twice-monthly Saturday clinic hours.

“When we reopen, we are going to make it super safe for doctors to come and work here,” Hunt said, noting personal protective equipment will be provided, patients screened and temperature checks completed.

She’s hoping with the slowdown in some medical disciplines due to COVID-19, a few medical professionals might now have some spare time to help.

“It’s so fulfilling for the volunteers who work there,” she said. “The esprit de corps of the doctors is just phenomenal And the patients are so grateful.”

For more information or to schedule a tour of the clinic, contact Clinic Operations Manager Yazmin Mejia at 925-439-2009 or email her at pittsburg@rotacarebayarea.org.

To make an appointment, call 925-439-2009 from 1 to 3 p.m. on Wednesdays. The clinic is at the St. Vincent de Paul Family Resource Center, 2210 Gladstone Drive.



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Judith Prieve | East County journalist

Judith Prieve is an East Bay journalist. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she has worked as a reporter, features editor and assistant metro editor at newspapers in Wisconsin and Northern California and has been at what is now the Bay Area News Group for more than 25 years.

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