

University of Miami's Pediatric Mobile Clinic gives kids access to healthcare

The University of Miami's Pediatric Mobile Clinic brings healthcare to hundreds of children across Miami-Dade.

BY HOWARD COHEN

Tyler Harris smiles as he awaits his turn for blood work.

What 12-year-old welcomes the needle -- let alone braves it with a smile?

"It's great, they give us a lot of information and they take care of us," the Parkway Middle School seventh grader explains while sitting in a classroom-cum-makeshift medical office at Opa-locka's Nathan B. Young Elementary School.

Tyler, one of eight children in his family, gets his medical needs taken care of via the University of Miami's Pediatric Mobile Clinic, a free public service that travels throughout Miami-Dade to help families who lack health insurance.

Dad, Linzsy Harris, a building manager in downtown Miami with children ranging from 12 to 22, finds the service invaluable. Without it, the cost of healthcare for his family would be prohibitive.

"I needed to find good doctors, whatever I had to do to get good doctors," he said. "I'm loving this." Two of his sons, Tyler and Linzsy Jr., 14, are with him today and seeing doctors.

The recent earthquake in Haiti has led the UM staff of physicians to ramp up efforts to treat new arrivals.

"We've already seen five kids who were earthquake survivors," says the medical director of the pediatric mobile clinic, Dr. Adrian Khaw. "To get into school, they come through us. We've done all the school physicals, immunizations and they are going to need mental health services. Can you imagine? They have [moved] to a new culture, some of their families faced death and what they saw with their eyes there and heard and smelled . . ." he said, shaking his head.

On this soggy day, the clinic visited the Opa-locka school. By mid-morning had already seen about five families such as the Harrises who braved the deluge.

“We're busier now, we've seen a lot more demographic changes, a lot more American patients that have lost their insurance and their kids end up here for regular care,” Khaw, 33, said.

As the mobile clinic enters its 18th year, its goal of providing free comprehensive health care for children in underserved communities continues.

“It's a medical home for all of their services,” says Khaw, who estimates the clinic treats 20 children per day.

The mobile clinic was initially formed as a partnership between UM and Children's Health Fund to serve the needs of families affected by Hurricane Andrew.

The program has grown to serve 21 locations in Miami-Dade, with the mobile clinic traveling daily to see low-income families in different areas, including Homestead, Opa-locka, Miami Beach, Hialeah, Overtown and Little Haiti.

Services include primary medical care such as immunizations, management of acute and chronic illnesses, lab tests, hearing and vision screenings, mental health counseling, prescriptions and social work.

All free. The clinic's patients don't have insurance or the means to pay for physicians' care. Even when families find new full-time employment, it can take several months before health care benefits kick in.

Before the economy went into a perfect storm, the clinic already saw an increase in patients.

In 2006, mobile clinic staff treated 1,700 patients. In 2008, the year with the most current figures, medical visits grew to 2,100 while the 11-member staff remained constant.

Florida ranks last in the nation in terms of access to child healthcare, said Dr. Steven Lipshultz, UM's chairman of pediatrics. In Miami-Dade, 30 percent of children live in poverty.

“We're the worst for kids that have no insurance or motivated families who can get preventative care,” Lipshultz said. “In these times of a poor economy, more Haitian immigrant children, and less funding for medical care for indigent children, this program becomes particularly important.”

One challenge in keeping the program going is, of course, funding. It cost about \$800,000 annually to provide the service, Lipshultz said. The funds come through a combination of grants and fundraising efforts from Children's Health Fund,

Florida Department of Health, Florida Area Health Education Centers and Jackson Memorial Hospital.

During a recent visit to Nathan B. Young Elementary, University of Miami President Donna Shalala toured the 37-foot mobile unit parked out front.

The clinic, Shalala said, is ``providing services for those who don't have regular access to physicals and it connects children with other services in the community. It's a very important community service -- and it's very expensive for us to do this -- but we have to support our community and get out of downtown Miami and get to the people who really need our services."

``This tells us a lot about why we need health care reform, to make it seamless so everyone has someone coordinating their services," Shalala added.

School principal Raymond Sands said most students at his school -- 90 percent - lack proper dental care and, more than anything else, parents have expressed a desire to have such care. However, a dental mobile clinic is not funded yet, said Judy Schaechter, the UM's associate chair of pediatrics.

Meantime, Tyler Harris is still smiling. This time, tucked inside the truck, he's just been seen by Shalala -- ever the school booster.

``Are you going to the U one day?" Shalala asks the Harris brothers. ``You've got to get good grades!"