



# United Way Community Matters

By Mary Lou Goeke

## Salud Para La Gente

On a daily basis we read increasingly grim news reports of the deteriorating economy of the State of California, and further May "budget revise" proposals from the Governor to slash State expenditures in an effort to contain the ever-ballooning deficit, now "ballparked" at over \$ 24.3 billion, and rising. The Governor proposes massive cuts in health care programs, leading to the dismantling of the "safety net" or "community health center" system of care for California's uninsured and underserved populations. A "safety net" provider is literally that: the last resort for people who have no where else to go for health care.

One of the largest safety net providers here in Santa Cruz County is Salud Para La Gente, a nonprofit public benefit corporation, with 501 c 3 tax status, a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), with 6 clinic sites and administrative offices in Watsonville, and 2 sites in the City of Santa Cruz. In calendar year 2008 Salud had over 102,000 patient visits.

FQHC is a designation under federal law and regulation which describes federal expectations of provider groups which serve the needy, and which provides a particular reimbursement system for those services. FQHCs must meet rigorous federal guidelines.

Since its inception as a "storefront" free clinic in 1979, and its incorporation in 1980, Salud has been a leader in providing health care for low-income families in this community. All patients are welcome at Salud, which accepts private insurance, public insurance, or sliding scale private pay based on federal income guidelines. If a patient does not have insurance, Salud staff assists the patient in ascertaining whether the patient qualifies for a public insurance program, such as Medi-Cal, Health Families, Healthy Kids among other options.

Salud provides comprehensive primary health care for the entire family, currently including medical, dental, eye care services and adult day care. Medical providers include physicians practicing internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics, and family practice/family medicine. In addition to 10 physicians, Salud's providers presently include an optometrist, 9 dentists, 5 nurse practitioners and physician assistants, as well as registered dental assistants, dental assistants, and a variety of elder care staff. Salud recently received federal stimulus funds which will enable it to hire additional providers.

Salud staff is bilingual in English and Spanish, and various staff members also speak French, Tagalog and other languages.

Along with other safety net providers in the County (including, for example, the County clinics, Planned Parenthood, Santa Cruz Women's Health Center, Dientes Community Dental Care) Salud is alarmed at the elimination or drastic reductions in programs which enable these providers to serve those in need.

Increasingly, as people are losing their jobs and losing their health insurance, they are turning to community clinics for their care. With the slated July 1 elimination of Medi-Cal "optional benefits"—which include adult dental, optometry, podiatry, audiology, speech therapy, psychology services, chiropractic care and acupuncture—Salud and other providers are scrambling to make staffing and other adjustments to treat as many Medi-Cal patients as possible in these service areas before July 1.

Not only will adult Medi-Cal beneficiaries lose access to necessary services, but with the elimination of the Health Families Program as proposed by the Governor, approximately 1 million California children will lose eligibility, including more than 100,000 children statewide who receive care at community health centers, and approximately 6,300 children in Santa Cruz County alone.

Salud and other safety net clinics are essential to the health of our County's residents, especially as the economy degrades, and are worthy of the community's support. It is widely agreed that the private sector cannot absorb the patient population served by the safety net clinics.

Many commentators have observed that the elimination and reduction of health care programs, while apparently designed to reduce State expenditures, is not at all a savings in the long run, in that people who do not receive health care, including dental care, will suffer deteriorating and complicated health conditions, will miss work and school, and will turn to hospital emergency rooms for assistance—facilities which are already overwhelmed and operating at over-capacity.

With elimination and reduction of health care programs to "save" State dollars, California loses massive sums of federal match money, which has increased from 50% to 60% and in some instances 61%.

If you would like to help support the safety net clinics, you can contact Governor Schwarzenegger and First Lady Maria Shriver and your legislators (State Senators Simitian and Maldonado and Assembly members Monning and Caballero) to urge them to support health care expenditures, and reject elimination or reduction of valuable programs.

For further information on Salud Para La Gente and its services, visit Salud's web site at [www.splg.org](http://www.splg.org), or contact Sara Clarenbach at (831) 728-8250.

*For the past 16 years Mary Lou Goeke has been the Executive Director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County. She has 32 years of experience providing social services to elders, children and families. The mission of United Way is to improve the lives of the people of Santa Cruz County by convening the community to seek solutions to their needs and by efficiently raising funds for the human care programs the United Way supports. Their website is [www.unitedwaysc.org](http://www.unitedwaysc.org).*