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New clinic gives refugees hope and a healthy start

By Debra Lin
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After five years of financial struggle and red tape, a sign that reads "WE ARE OPEN," finally stands proudly in the window of the Alliance Health Clinic at 5952 El Cajon Blvd.

On Aug. 1, a diverse and excited crowd cheered and passed around hugs on the sidewalk outside the clinic as they witnessed Mayor Jerry Sanders cut the ribbon, symbolically marking the opening of the clinic.

It was built to provide low-cost and culturally sensitive primary care to medically underserved communities in San Diego. "This is a small step, really, in helping to bridge that disparity in healthcare," said Clinic Administrator Dr. Maria L. Reyes. "We have a wide gap in the underserved population. We want to help bridge that."

Although the clinic is open to anyone, most of its patients will be refugees and immigrants who suffer from trauma-related mental health problems and long standing chronic diseases.

As people filed into the clinic, Reyes gave a tour of the sparkling new facility housing six examination rooms, three of them devoted to infant checkups, OB/GYN and minor emergencies. Filled with new medical equipment, hopeful faces and a festive air, it was hard to imagine that the clinic was just an

empty room only a few years ago.

The clinic's story began humbly. CEO Walter Lam said that when he was a refugee in 1986, "if you told me one day we'd open a clinic I'd say you must be out of your mind. When we started, we had not a single cent in our account."

But through the kindness and generosity of people who went out of their way to help, an empty space slowly began to evolve into a much-needed clinic funded entirely by private donations up until its opening day.

When Medical Director Dr. Martin Kabongo embarked on this project with Lam, he had one requirement. "We have to be unique," he said. "Why start a clinic in San Diego if we don't have culturally competent care?"

More than 400,000 people live without health insurance in San Diego County, including thousands of refugees from Bosnia, Kosovo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Burma and Vietnam. In addition to struggling with health care costs, many of them don't receive the best medical care when they arrive in San Diego because of daunting cultural and language barriers.

As a step to break through those barriers, the clinic offers translation services in more than 80 languages. It also operates on a sliding fee scale, which takes into account family size

and income, and comes out to be "practically nothing," according to Reyes.

In addition, the clinic is conveniently located in the same building as its parent organization, the Alliance for African Assistance, a resettlement agency that provides refugees and immigrants of all nationalities with easy access to housing, education and employment services.

"They've seen murder, been tortured...they come with just the clothes on their backs and a plastic bag filled with paperwork. We meet them at the airport and give them everything they need," said Reyes.

The clinic is open Mondays through Thursdays from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., in consideration of those who have to work during the day, and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For at least the next two months, the clinic and the Alliance are expecting the arrival of numerous Burmese refugees who are fleeing persecution by the totalitarian Burmese regime. Many of these refugees hear about the alliance through their relatives and friends who have already settled in San Diego. To provide them with the best possible medical care, the clinic is currently seeking a Burmese translator.

"This has been a long pregnancy - five years. That's even longer than an elephant pregnancy," joked Kabongo at the opening reception, after about 100 attendees sang "Happy Birthday" to the clinic. "Today the baby is born. It's a new beginning for culturally competent services."

Anyone in need of services is urged to call 619-988-2210 or 619-229-8030.