

Los Angeles free clinic clients, volunteers discuss crisis of US health care

By our reporters
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Sunday, September 30, was the fourth and final day of Care Harbor's annual free clinic at the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena. The organization, which relies on volunteer labor by doctors, nurses, dentists and other medical professionals as well as nonprofessionals, provides free medical, dental and vision services to uninsured, under-insured and under-served residents.

Its web site states that Care Harbor volunteers also provide "immunizations and screenings including mammograms and Pap smears. Extensive patient education and counseling will promote wellness, prevention and self-care among our most vulnerable population."

Previous free clinics in recent years have met with such an overwhelming response—with thousands of residents from in and around LA, and sometimes from quite distant areas in California—that clinic organizers were compelled to limit the number of people served. Prospective clients had to apply in advance, and they were given plastic bracelets to wear at the event. This year, the number of patients was capped at 4,800, leaving many more to fend for themselves or endure their health issues until next year.

A further restriction, according to some of the patients, was that people seeking help could not get both optical and dental services, but had to choose between the two.

The fact that the clinics, which travel to cities around the US and Latin America, exist at all underscores the inability of capitalism to provide for the most basic needs of the working class.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team interviewed a number of clients who were waiting outside for services, as well as some volunteers who had come to help out. The WSWs team also distributed

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White's campaign statement, "Health care is a social right, not a privilege of the rich".

Many of those interviewed were either unemployed or underemployed. LA County is home to at least 2.7 million uninsured people.

One Spanish-speaking woman who wished to remain anonymous told the reporters that she had just arrived by bus from Inglewood, where she lives. She has lived in the United States for seven years, and she works as a babysitter, taking care of two or three babies at a time. She is paid in cash and has no insurance coverage.

She made her appointment and got her bracelet eight days ago, yet she was only able to come on the last day. She had come for the optical care. She had a pair of glasses perched on her head, but "they're from the 99," i.e., they were non-prescription, magnifying "reading glasses" purchased at discount stores and pharmacies that many working class people buy for lack of resources to get prescription lenses.

Although her situation is difficult, and the clinic only provides limited services once a year, she told the reporters that she is grateful that she was going to be able to get free glasses.

A Filipino man, now US citizen, who's currently employed but with no health care coverage, has lived in the United States for 45 years. When asked about how the crisis in health care should be addressed, he said, "In my opinion, they should set up clinics" in different areas "so that people that belong to that district can go there. This is just my opinion, but they'd have to be publicly financed."

A reporter explained that the Socialist Equality Party advocated removing private profit from health care. When asked his opinion of the Obama administration's policies, he said, "I vote, but I'm not much in politics.

Last time, I voted for Obama because he seemed okay. This time, I haven't decided, not yet." A reporter gave him a copy of Jerry White's statement and urged him to read the WSWs.

Asked about changes in the US since he immigrated, he said, "There is a big change. During that time, it was easier to get a job, I think. People were much happier during that time."

Randy and Kimberly are students at a local career training college, studying to be dental assistants. They were taking a break from volunteer work. Randy explained, "So far we're running into cavities, checkups, people dealing with a pain in their tooth, stuff like that." Kimberly added, "It's bad. There are so many people without their dentures and partials fitting because their mouths change and they don't have insurance to get them fixed, so they have no teeth working so we're giving partials and dentures, crowns... Nobody has insurance anymore!"

"And there are people who have jobs," Randy added, "but they don't include dental or medical insurance or anything like that, it's not part of their benefits. That's one thing, so they come over here for it. Let's help them out."

Randy and Kimberly also expressed the vicissitudes of obtaining an education. "The school offers us financial aid," Randy said. "The financial aid covers everything that we need, and then we don't start paying until six months after graduation. We don't start paying our loan until after we're hired."

Kimberly interjected that the program takes eight months and she talked about her financing arrangement. "Right now I'm paying off my private [student] loan during school, and right now I can afford it. I pay \$22 a month—I just pay the interest—and once I get a job I'll be paying probably \$200 a month off of both of the loans for 10 years." Kimberly has a one-year-old baby.

Asked about the Obama administration, Randy said, "I don't really pay that much attention to politics. I don't watch TV that much; I'm studying and working, keep the money coming." Kimberly said, "I haven't kept up. I don't have a converter box, so we don't have TV right now."

Randy and Kimberly considered the volunteering as helpful toward their career aspirations, both in terms of the experience and as a valuable item to include on

their resumes. Though optimistic about their own futures, they expressed disquiet over the situation for some of the other students, like medical assistants (MAs).

Kimberly observed, "MAs aren't getting hired very much because LVNs (licensed vocational nurses) are trained to do pretty much an MA's job and RN's (registered nurse's) job. Medical assistants are having a harder time finding jobs because a nurse can do more. So if you have a nurse, why get a medical assistant on top of your nurse?"

Daron Howard came for medical and dental services. "I wanted the vision but I heard that you have to choose between the dental and the vision." The last time he had seen a dentist was "a few years ago, maybe two years ago. I just got a job, no benefits; it's a part-time job."

When asked about his views on the Obama administration, Daron replied, "He's doing the best that he can because the opposition ... I know there are certain things he wants to get passed, but the Republicans are just not letting them pass. None of these bills; they're like, 'We want to vote down everything.'" But when a reporter countered that in his first two years Obama had Democratic majorities in both houses, yet he carried out a right-wing agenda, and that both parties are servants of corporate interests, he granted, "Oh yeah, they are."

Asked about his take on the health care crisis in the US, Daron responded, "We're considered the richest country in the world, the best country in the world. I wouldn't want to live any place else, but it's a shame that all of our citizens don't have access to health care, you know? That should be something that everyone should have access to. It actually keeps the cost down, because if you can maintain someone's health, or educate them earlier before something bad or catastrophic happens, you're actually saving money!"

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