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## Belen school-based health center making a difference



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Belen High School students and staff are getting an added boost during this year's cold and flu season with the school-based health center located just a few steps away.

The center, which has been operational since the 2005-06 school year, is open during school hours, and offers students and staff members sick and wellness exams to help keep them healthy, especially during the winter months.

Family nurse practitioner Therese Hidalgo treats patients with sore throats and ear infections to those who have more chronic symptoms. Hidalgo can prescribe medicine on site, such as antibiotics, immunizations and allergy medications.

She works as a supplement to local health care providers to help treat patients who visit the center. The center is exclusively for students and staff at the school, as well as kids who attend the day care at Belen High School.

"The goal is to keep students in school," Hidalgo said. "Kids miss class a lot of times because they are at the doctor."

Hidalgo said students must have parental permission to register, but don't have to have an appointment to be seen at the center, which has two exam rooms and a pharmacy lab.

About 10 people come through the center each day, but the center has seen as many as 70 people when immunizations were given out earlier this month. The center takes insurance, but services will not be denied for those without the ability to pay.

"A lot of people that come in don't know how sick they are," Hidalgo said. "They spend a lot of time outside of work when I could have treated them here without the long lines at the emergency room."

The nurse practitioner, who has a portion of her salary paid for by the state Department of Health, also consults with others to make informed decisions about patients.

She said district specialists such as psychiatrists and substance abuse workers meet once a week to provide better treatment plans for patients.

In one instance, officials met after a patient with a problem of substance abuse had outbursts of anger that led to an injury of another student.

"We want to attack issues that plague adolescents," Hidalgo said of the community outreach. "No one person has the expertise in all areas. It's the only way to find out."

The center wants to promote itself and hopes to gain more patients from parent-teacher conferences. The center is funded through the New Mexico Department of Health, and must show it's providing services to the community to sustain its services.

Officials will make presentations in November, and also conduct a survey to determine how patient's needs are being met.

"When we first opened up, there was a lot of buzz," said Donna Alfonso, the district's health services coordinator. "Kids that go to school here may not even know this is here."

The center also offered students at the career academy a chance to get some practice when

officials at the center administered seasonal flu immunizations earlier this month. Students in the nursing program checked vital signs of patients while they waited to get vaccinated.

Hidalgo said the center gives students an opportunity to take advantage of services such as testing for substance abuse and for sexually transmitted diseases, which are private and confidential.

For teachers and staff members, the center offers a nice alternative to waiting in line at the doctor's office. Staff members often use preparation time or time in between classes to get checked out if they aren't feeling up to par.

Hidalgo said there are a lot of students in the Belen School District who don't have proper health care.

"You would be surprised at the amount of students who don't have access to health care or are under insured," Hidalgo said. "This gives students the opportunity to have that care."

The center has the support of the Belen Board of Education, which approved a measure to bring funding to the center in 2005.

Board member Julian Luna, who has been on the board for more than eight years, echoed Hidalgo's statements, and said the center is perfect for people without insurance.

"I think it's the best thing the school board has done for the community," Luna said. "I have had nothing but positive comments about it. It provides physicals for our student athletes, and tackles health care issues in a big way.

"It offers students the ability to have some type of facility in case any health issue might pop up," he added. "Very few centers were funded throughout the state, and we were lucky to be a beneficiary. We will do anything we can do to support it &mdash; anything we can do to help, we will be there."

Becky Rivera, who has been at the school for 18 years, said she likes the idea of having the center. She said she used the center last week to get her symptoms checked out.

"I didn't want to go to the doctor unless I had to," said Rivera, who works at the child care center on campus. "I'd rather go to the center after school or during my prep time than to have to sit and wait at the doctor's office."

Rivera said students who have children in child care can also take their kids to get checked out rather than missing out on classes because their child is sick.

"They can diagnose right away," Rivera said. "It's a fast way to make sure their baby is OK."

In addition, Rivera said she thinks the center offers an alternative to possibly catching another secondary infection at a clinic.

"A lot of doctors are overloaded," Rivera said. "This is a better quality service."

Parents can enroll their child for Medicaid and other health insurance programs through the health center. Call Donna Alfonso at 966-1023 for times or questions.

The School Health Advisory Council meets every other month.