

Natividad serves Salinas' neediest

Amy Wu , The Californian

The day is young but it is already buzzing with energy at Natividad Medical Center (NMC). A chopper lands at the trauma center, there's a breakfast rush in the brightly-lit cafeteria, BoBo and Beah the therapy dogs greet folks in the waiting room, and the hospital's 172 beds are sometimes near capacity.

Architecturally and aesthetically Natividad doesn't necessarily stand out but it has a special place in our community.

It began in 1888, grew in quality and size over the years with the current building opening in 1998. It is one of only 19 "safety net" hospitals in the state.

"Across the board, they are serving as the safety net for people who don't have any other access to care," said Jennifer Williams, director of development at Natividad Medical Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the hospital.

The hospital has come a long way from being saddled with a \$25 million debt in 2005. Two years later it emerged in the black with the help of a turnaround effort and support from nearby hospitals including the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula (CHOMP) and Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital (SVMH).

Regionally, Natividad is well known for providing care to underserved communities in Salinas and surrounding areas.

Many of Natividad's patients are agricultural workers and their families. At least 51% percent of its patients have limited English proficiency. The hospital also regularly sees and treats Salinas' homeless population. Many of the people it serves are uninsured although that number has decreased with the Affordable Care Act.



Angelica Isidro, wearing a yellow jacket, is one of the full time interpreters for the hospital's indigenous interpreting service.(Photo: Provided)

The hustle and bustle can also be attributed to a rise in visitors and patients. The Emergency Room, for example - built to serve 24,000 annually - serves 52,000 a year. The hospital's trauma center, launched in 2015, is also the only one in the region.

“They get very creative,” said Williams of the emergency room staff. Most recently, the hospital gave its easily crowded waiting room a complete makeover to improve its efficiency.

“Now there is a window with an actual nurse or another professional who is there who can observe the patients waiting for care,” said Williams.

With an emphasis on shifting inpatient services to outpatient, the hospital will soon launch 5,200 square feet of clinic space including a women’s imaging center and cardiology clinics and include 14 exam and procedure rooms. The new clinic space and technologies – including 3D mammography machines - are being funded by a \$2.5 million grant from the Central California Alliance for Health, a regional nonprofit focused on helping low-income people. Many of the services are currently performed in gray-colored mobile units parked outside of the trauma center.

“The vision is to move what is inside the trailers to what is inside the hospital,” said Williams.

Radiology is also getting an upgrade with the latest equipment including two CT scanners and a nuclear medicine camera. The Natividad Medical Foundation, which was started in 1988, has grown significantly from \$156,000 in 2007 to \$1.8 million in 2015 due in large part to the efforts of CEO and President Linda Ford. She joined the Foundation in 2007. The Foundation funds a variety of needs from buying car seats for newborns whose parents can’t afford them to clothing, bus tickets or motel rooms for homeless just discharged from the hospital.

Natividad’s interpretation services, launched in 2014, are also expanding from 15,000 two years ago to 40,000. The hospital’s translators include four and half full-time Spanish interpreters and the equivalent of two full-time interpreters under its Mixteco and Triqui programs. The service can offer up to 17 indigenous languages through a pool of interpreters, said Judith Pacheco the Indigenous Interpreting Coordinator. The service is now being picked up by the University of San Francisco’s Medical Center, Oakland Children’s Hospital, and others.

The interpreters come with their own heartwarming stories. Angelica Isidro was a former farm worker who worked in the fields for 22 years, and interpreted for more than 30 years for friends and fellow workers, before completing the Indigenous Interpreting Plus training program and joined the foundation in 2012. Isidro started interpreting for a single reason. “Helping people,” she said.

Donations and funds are also driven by the 164-member Agriculture Leadership Council, founded in 2010 by John D’Arrigo - President, CEO and Chairman of the Board of D’Arrigo Bros. Co. - with support from 22 of the valley’s biggest agriculture families. This group has raised more than \$2.3 million to date, much of it funding medical equipment.

Hospitals aren’t always the happiest places, but on this recent weekday, there was a sense of community here at Natividad.

The hallways come to life with a massive mural from Salinas artist Jose Ortiz, or the black and white photo series entitled “First Breath” by photographer Scott Campbell.

Currently the art exhibition “From Morning Mists to Setting Suns: Healing Landscapes” by Monterey Bay Plein Air Painters Association an annual exhibition, where 30% of the proceeds from the art sold benefit the hospital’s spiritual care program. The hospital also added art to its mental health unit and photography from famed local photographer Kirk Kennedy in the acute rehab center.

On Wednesday, the main entrance transformed into a farmer’s market featuring local vendors.

One of my last stops of the day was the cafeteria, decorated with photos from Earthbound Farms, open to the public and open on the weekends. The salad bar with local produce was affordable and fresh.

On reflection, the color and the stories inside the hallways and walls of Natividad are tremendous, at times overwhelming, but overall inspiring and uplifting.

Contact Government Reporter Amy Wu at 831-737-6791 or awu@thecalifornian.com. Follow Wu on Twitter @wu_salnews or www.facebook.com/amywu-californian. We welcome items, suggestions, and photos for “Hello Salinas!” Amy also co-hosts “Potholes and Streetlamps” with Mark Carbonaro focusing on Salinas on a weekly radio program at 10:40 am on Saturdays on PowerTalk 1460 AM & 101.1 FM – or via the iHeartradio app at www.power-talk1460.com