

# Coastal Grower

SPRING | 2017





# Meeting the Health Care Needs of the Community: The Gonzales Way

BY IRWIN SPEIZER

**A**t the new Taylor Farms Family Health and Wellness Center in Gonzales, California patients are served by three doctors, a physician's assistant and several other staff members. In another part of the city, Clinica de Salud has set up shop with one doctor and one dentist in temporary quarters as it starts construction on its new clinic on the same site, with plans for a bigger medical staff.

Four years ago, Gonzales, with a population of less than 9,000, was just another small rural community sorely lacking in access to health care, its residents served primarily by one doctor and one dentist. Today, Gonzales residents rate higher than those in typical urban areas in the doctor-to-patient and dentist-to-patient ratio, thanks to a sudden influx of medical practitioners and newly constructed facilities. The city now has six doctors and four dentists, along with related new medical personnel.

"Access to medical services has really expanded," says Gonzales Mayor, Maria

Orozco. "I think what brought it about was the persistence of city staff and elected officials working in partnership with clinics and non-profits like Clinica de Salud."

Gonzales was helped in part by a focus on rural health care in Monterey County by medical providers. But the construction of two new clinics in a town of its size suggests there is more going on in Gonzales.

The Gonzales Community Health Assessment in 2012 noted that the city was in a federally-designated Health Professional Shortage Area, with an estimated one in five residents having no clinic or physician for routine or preventative care. "There was very little access, and not just for those living in Gonzales but also those outside the city," Orozco says.

According to the National Rural Health Association, urban areas have an average of one doctor for every 1,900 people; rural areas average one for every 2,500 people. Similarly,

the urban rate for dentists is one for every 3,300; for rural, one for every 5,000. Gonzales was well behind even the rural rate in both categories when the health assessment was done in 2012. Today it surpasses average urban rates with about one doctor for every 1,500 residents and one dentist for every 2,250.

The fact that the health care expansion happened so quickly in Gonzales is partly a result of fortunate timing. Health providers were becoming more focused on bringing services to the underserved rather than waiting until very ill people showed up in expensive hospital emergency rooms. At the same time, land became available for new clinics in Gonzales.

But the rapid pace of change is also a testament to the city's can-do spirit. Gonzales touts itself as a place with a unique vibe, something it calls The Gonzales Way, which speaks to a community spirit that inhabits its residents and public officials and helps the city accomplish goals. So when the health assess-

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"We were very deficient," says Gonzales City Manager, Rene Mendez. "Access became the big thing."

Gonzales had been focused on economic development and snagged several significant job-creating projects in recent years, including a major new Taylor Farms vegetable processing and cooling facility. That plant draws electric power from a giant nearby wind turbine,

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**Clockwise from top: Taylor Farms Family Health & Wellness Center. Christine C. Ponzio, M.D. Center staff along with doctors (l to r) Alberto Martinez, M.D. Christine C. Ponzio, M.D. Anita Frago, PA-C Oscar Gantes, M.D.**



erected by the city in conjunction with Taylor.

The good relations with Taylor from that project came in handy on the health care front. Among those looking to expand rural services was Salinas Valley Memorial Health Care System (SVMHS). When land became available in a part of the city designated for new commercial construction, SVMHS joined with the city's one full-time doctor, Dr. Christine Ponzio, to propose a new clinic on the site. SVMHS launched a \$3 million capital campaign to finance the project.

Bruce Taylor, chairman and CEO of Taylor Farms, stepped up with a million-dollar donation from the company to help fund the new facility and put the company name on the building. City officials figure it didn't hurt that Taylor had a favorable impression with the city's ability to efficiently shepherd development projects to completion. And a new clinic would help serve the employees now working at Taylor's Gonzales site. Taylor was joined by a number of other farming companies and families who pitched in to help finance the project.

The Taylor Farms Health and Wellness Center now offers a range of health care services, including immunizations, lab services, and various wellness programs. It expects to handle about 25,000 patient visits a year.

SVMHS applauds the backing of Taylor Farms and others in financing the project, but also points to the cooperative assistance provided by the city in ensuring the project stayed on track.

"[The city] saw an opportunity to improve access to their community and they did every-

thing they could to make it possible," says Pete Delgado, President and CEO of SVMHS. He says the new clinic has been so well received that SVMHS is already considering adding more physicians and space in Gonzales.

Clinica de Salud, meanwhile, had been interested in bringing its services to Gonzales but needed a site. The health services organization specializes in serving rural communities and low-income Hispanic patients, with about seven of 10 patients on Medicaid.

When a change in state law eliminated redevelopment agencies like the one in Gonzales, the city wound up owning a downtown parcel. The city decided in 2014 to sell it at a nominal cost to Clinica de Salud. The clin-

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ic moved portable buildings onto the site and opened in the summer of 2016 with a doctor and a dentist on staff. A permanent building is currently under construction on the site.

Dr. Max Cuevas, CEO of Clinica de Salud says he found Gonzales to be a supportive partner in the project. "Overall, it has been a great experience," Cuevas says. He also figures the Gonzales spirit can help as he tries to recruit additional doctors. "It is a small and friendly place," he says. "I love going to Gonzales and I try to sell that in recruitment."

In addition to the new doctors and facilities in Gonzales, the city recently joined with the Monterey County Health Department to hire Mario Guzman as a health equity fellow to increase awareness of health inequities and promote healthy policies and options for underserved populations. Guzman will be tasked with gathering input from residents that can be incorporated into the health element of the city's general plan.

Mendez anticipates that diagnostic services may follow the additional doctors to town, continuing the expansion of local health care services.

He says he doesn't spend much time monitoring how well Gonzales fares in health care access compared to other communities, even as Gonzales morphed from a small town with rural health care issues into a place with urban-level access.

"I don't wake up every morning and compare us to others," Mendez says. "We are doing this because it is what our community needs." **ce**

