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## Free clinic underscores need for health care fix

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

### Hundreds with little or no insurance show up in Hartford; 'It's sad,' says director of sponsor agency

**Hartford** - Finally, Angel M. Lordero could look forward to a good night's sleep. Since October, back pain "like a knife" had been keeping the 52-year-old New London resident awake at night. Lordero, who goes by "Manny," had injured himself in a fall over the summer at his previous job at a hotel, but because his current job as a line cook at a casino sports bar doesn't pay enough for him to be able to afford the health insurance his employer offers, he hadn't seen a doctor. In fact, he said, he hasn't had medical care in four years, the last time he had a job with good, affordable insurance.

On Wednesday, though, Lordero made the 100-plus-mile round-trip drive to the state capital on the same day as the start of the 2010 legislative session to take advantage of a one-day, free health care clinic run by the National Association of Free Clinics based in Alexandria, Va.

Overnight, the association had turned the Connecticut Convention Center, a venue better known for business expos and the annual flower show, into a full-service medical clinic with more than 70 doctor stations, on-site blood, urine, EKG and other diagnostic testing, physical therapy, dental and eye-care services, social workers and counseling, among other services.

More than 1,000 medical professionals and others volunteered their services for the day, and more than 1,100 uninsured and underinsured patients came from throughout Connecticut. A few even came from Massachusetts.

"We're here for the start of the General Assembly session in the insurance capital of the country to remind everyone that there are people here who need care, who work and who are voters," said Nicole Lamoureux, executive director of the association and a New London native, shortly after the clinic got under way. This is the first time her organization, a nonprofit that represents 1,200 free clinics with permanent, year-round operations, has run a one-day clinic anywhere on the East Coast, she said, and it chose Connecticut because 11 percent of its nonelderly residents are uninsured.

"That's a large number for a relatively small population," she said.

Lamoureux's association ran four one-day clinics last year in other parts of the country. They attracted thousands of patients and national media attention because of the health care debates going on in Congress at the time.

"It's great we got so many volunteers," said Lamoureux, adding that her mother, Maureen, and other family members are among them. "But it's sad that 1,100 people have to come here because they don't have insurance."

For Lordero, like many other patients, the day was more of a beginning of addressing his medical problems. After blood pressure, urine, cholesterol and other tests, a thorough

physical and some movement tests by Geraldine Marrocco, an advanced-practice registered nurse affiliated with Yale University and a practice in Fairfield, Lordero got a prescription for a muscle relaxer and an anti-inflammatory to relieve his back pain, which Marrocco said should prevent him from waking up at night in pain. She checked a list to verify that the two should cost him only \$4 each.

"But you've got a pretty good muscle spasm going on there. You should have an X-ray of your spine done," she said.

While his back problem was Lordero's most immediate concern, Marrocco found three others. A large cyst behind his left ear would need to be surgically removed by a dermatologist, she told him. For a broken tooth, he was told should go to the clinic's dental-care area. His blood pressure is also dangerously high, she told him, and would need regular monitoring, a low-salt diet and possibly medication. For all of these diagnoses, she referred him to the Community Health Center in New London to start follow-up care.

Lordero thanked Marrocco for her attentive and thorough care, but wondered how he would pay for the follow-up.

"Here's the key word: insurance," he said. "I don't have insurance."

Social workers at the clinic, Marrocco told him, may be able to help him find an answer to that problem.

A few booths from where Lordero and Marrocco's exchange took place, one of the doctors from the place Lordero had been referred was volunteering. By mid-afternoon, Dr. Nwando Olayiwola of the Community Health Center had seen about 20 patients, one of whom hadn't seen a doctor in 15 years and another who lost her job and her health insurance a year ago.

At the CHC, which runs clinics around the state in addition to New London, staff try to find insurance for patients like Lordero, Olayiwola said. Oftentimes, she said, people who are working but can't afford private insurance don't realize that they may qualify for some type of government insurance. Those who don't pay on a sliding scale based on their income. But regardless of whether Lordero qualifies for government insurance, finding a dermatologist willing to do the surgery could be difficult, Olayiwola acknowledged. Many specialists, she said, don't accept government insurance or self-pay patients.

"Specialty care of all types is a problem," she said.

While the clinic was intended as an apolitical event - with no sign-ups or pamphlets passed out to recruit patients or volunteers to support one side or another of the national health care debates - the politics of health care was never far from the minds of many.

Eric Fordham of Vernon, a freelance photographer, said he had helped with the Obama campaign and has become frustrated that efforts to reform health care have hit an impasse. The problem became personal three months ago, he said, when his wife, also a volunteer at the clinic, was laid off from her job and lost the health insurance that had been covering them both.

"Fortunately, both of us are healthy," he said.

Lordero, like several other patients and volunteers, said those who don't believe access to health insurance and health care is a problem the country must solve need only look at the turnout for the one-day clinic.

"This lets the country know there are people out there with no insurance who need health care and can't afford to pay for it," he said. "I'm just disgusted they can't get together and

get some kind of legislation passed."

<http://freeclinics.us>

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