

BP settlement money targets eastern N.O. health care

By: Jessica Gonzalez, Reporter May 30, 2014 0

Two providers in eastern New Orleans will receive part of a \$105 million BP oil spill settlement to improve health care access for communities affected by the 2010 disaster.

The New Orleans East Louisiana Community Health Center (NOELA CHC), which currently offers primary care for adults and children at two small clinics in a Chef Menteur Highway strip mall, will receive \$1.2 million to build a new 9,000-square-foot clinic.

Scheduled to open in late 2014, the federally qualified health center will be equipped with state-of-the-art technology and feature multilingual staff members to assist the clinic's Hispanic and Vietnamese patients.

Dr. Keith Winfrey, chief medical director for NOELA CHC, said the money will allow it to expand service offerings such as primary and preventive health care for the entire family as well as behavioral health programs, chronic disease management, wellness programs and social services.

"We see this as a resource with definite benefits to providing additional access and more expansive care," Winfrey said. "The new clinic and extra space allows us to have things like additional staff exam rooms and enhanced technology, but it also gives us a much greater presence in integrated behavioral health — we're one of the few centers here in the city that offer pediatric behavioral health."

Winfrey said the organization has been providing adult care since 2008 and began offering pediatric services in 2012. He hopes the expansion and convenience of having several different care options under one roof will increase awareness of what NOELA offers.

The Alliance Institute, the grant funding coordinator for the BP settlement program, also recognized that the area's Vietnamese population was lacking engagement efforts to help link them to available health care services.

"Language barriers and access is a major issue for marginalized communities in New Orleans," said Stephen Bradberry, executive director of the Alliance Institute. "What we're focused on is to not just reach out to the Vietnamese community, but to also work with service providers in order for them to be more sensitive to needs and cultural differences of this population."

To assist in that effort, the Alliance Institute tapped Vietnamese Initiatives in Economic Training for \$250,000 over a five-year period. Executive director Cyndi Nguyen said the funding will allow VIET to hire community engagement navigators. Through coordinating appointments and translating documents, hired navigators will assist non-English speakers with overcoming the cultural and language barriers that often inhibit them from seeking medical care, Nguyen said.

Over the last 12 years, VIET has relied heavily on grassroots funding, so the BP settlement allotment will allow the organization "to be around much longer," she said.

"Getting local grassroots funding has always been an issue," Nguyen said. "We've always been asked [in previous nonprofit partnerships] to engage the community, but there never has been funding... We still need manpower and this project recognized that."

The number of navigators the organization will hire is still being determined.

Set up in May 2012 to respond to the BP oil spill, the five-year Gulf Region Health Outreach Program is dedicated to strengthening health care, health literacy and the resiliency of coastal communities most affected by the 2010 disaster. In Louisiana, the parishes of Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Lafourche, Terrebonne and Cameron are included in the GRHOP program.

The health care projects under its umbrella are a collaborative partnership among the Louisiana Public Health Institute, Tulane University, University of Southern Mississippi, University of South Alabama, University of West Florida and Louisiana State University.

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